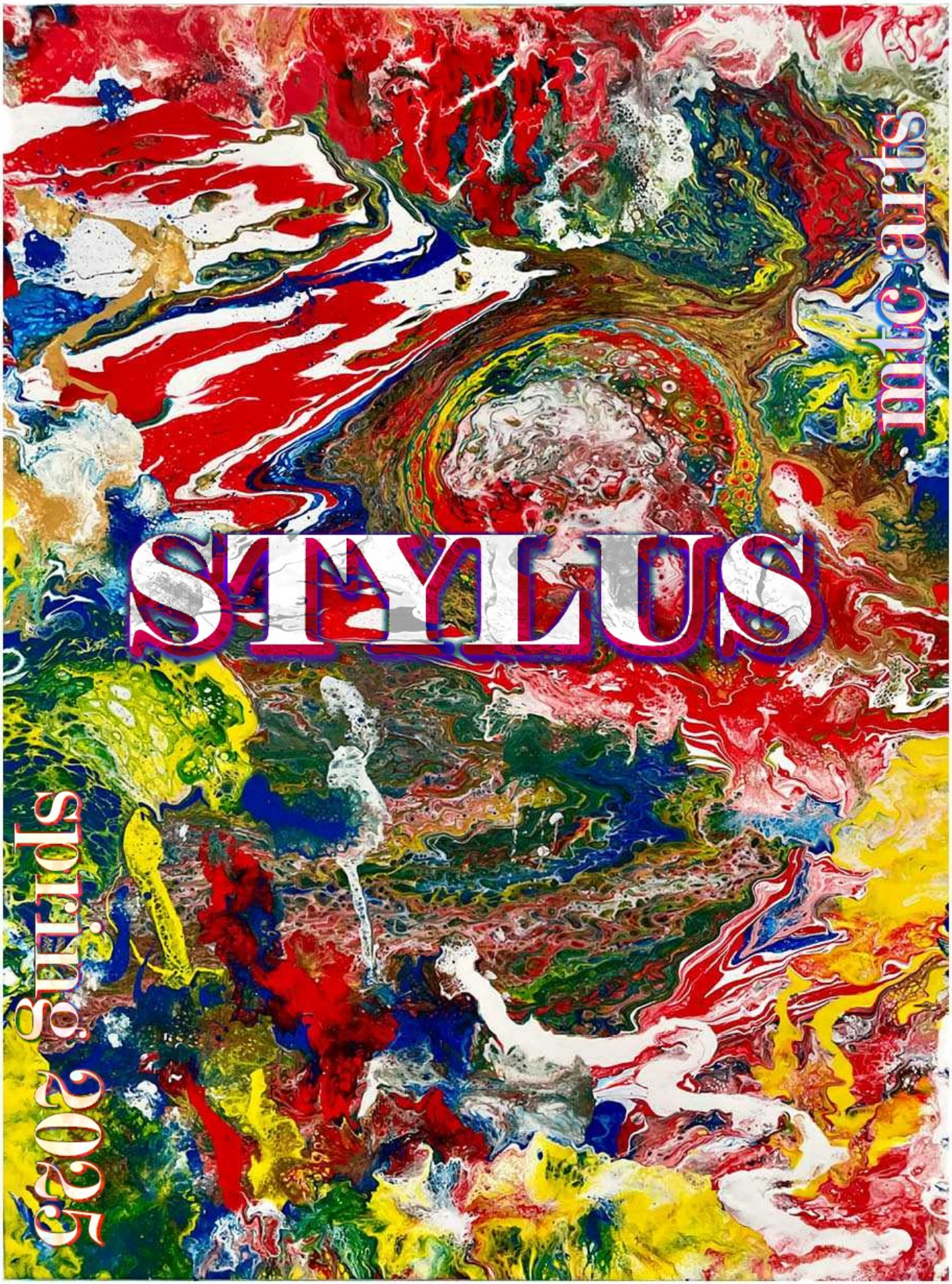
STYLUS
mtc arts
spring 2025

Victoria Watts "Abundance" August 28,2021 30x40 Arylic on Canvas

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spring ‘25

word + image at midlands technical college

credits

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history

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ACT 1

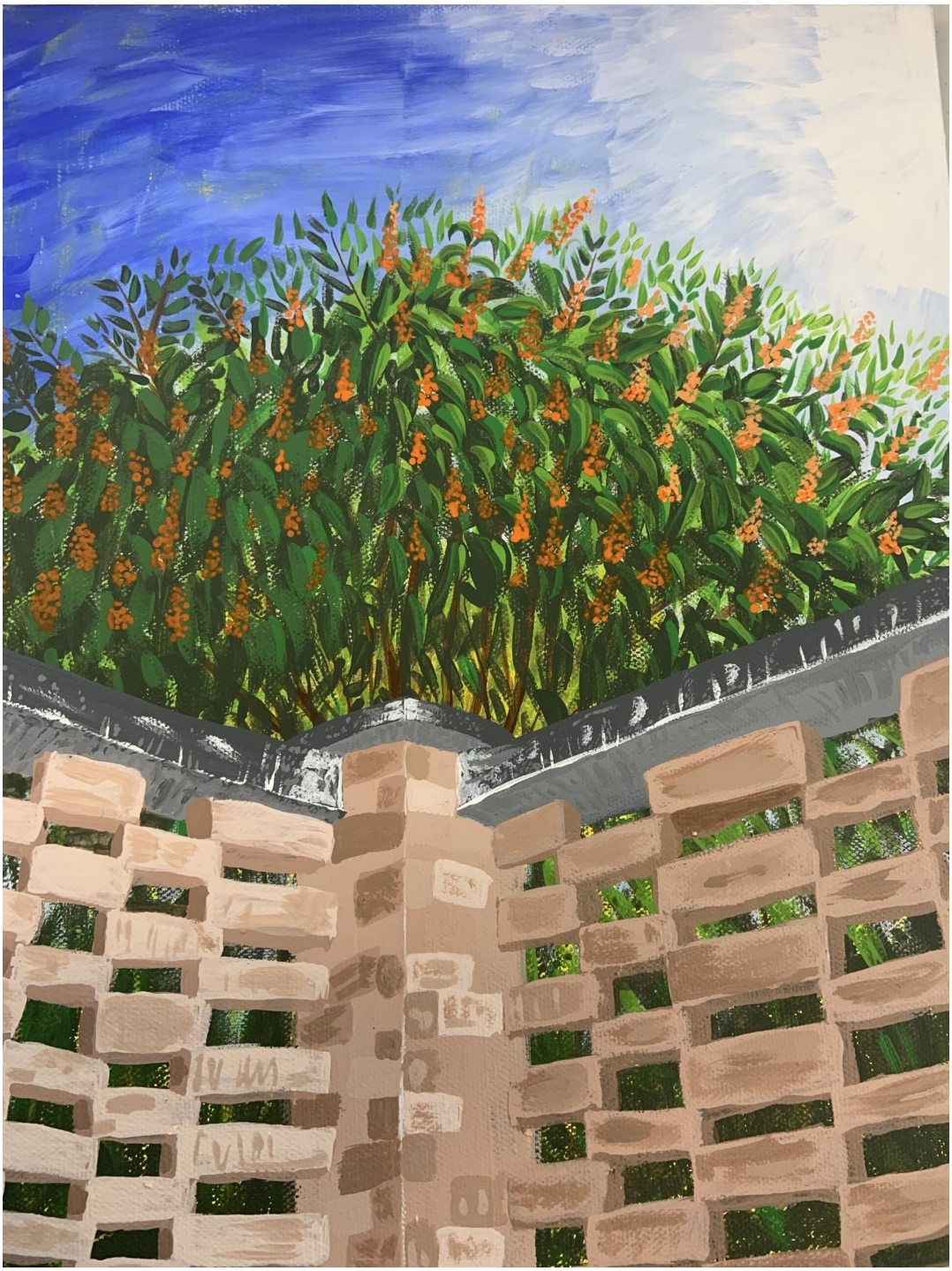
the nature of “nature”
of “self”
of “craft”

what is fundamental?

how did we come to be?
what is it we desire?

to learn?
to create?
to desire?

Nature



“Road Trip Around the World”

Imagine spending twelve days living on the road. Now imagine three college girls living out of a Subaru for two weeks, travelling across the country, faced with endless challenges and forced to learn from them. That is exactly what me and my two best friends did this summer, we roundtripped from South Carolina all the way to Colorado, hitting Wyoming, Idaho, Utah, New Mexico, and so many more along the way. We spent two nights in Winter Park, CO, then about a week in Yellowstone and Grand Tetons, and finished off our trip in Bountiful, Utah and Arches National Park in Moab. I took some beautiful pictures and have included them in this article, I had so much fun using my camera, and although nothing could compare to the sight I saw, pictures are a close second. This was my first time on a long trip, and I gained so much from the experience, and learned the highs and lows of exploring the wild west...let’s dive in.

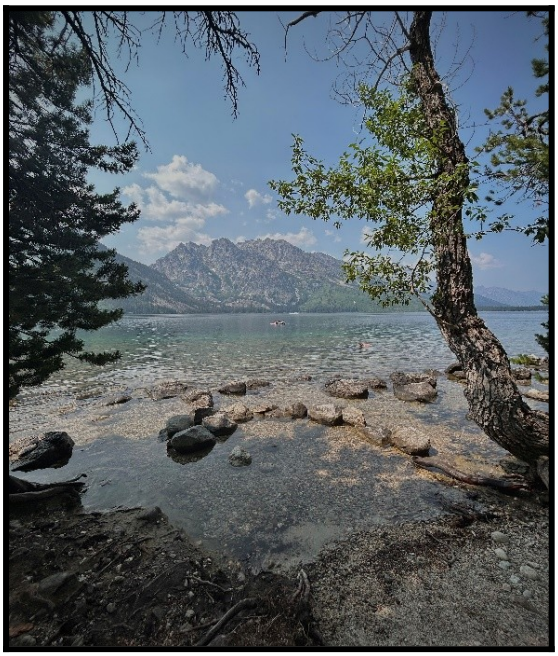
On our first nights of the trip, we stayed at The Vintage hotel in Winter Park, Colorado, a much needed reset after thirty straight hours in the car. On our initial drive, we encountered our first issue, getting carsick. I struggled throughout the first night, and this prevented me from driving the first two days, which immediately took a toll on my friends who had to pick up my slack and split the drive between the two of them. Thankfully, after some Benadryl from a CVS in Kansas, I was feeling better by the time we got to Winter Park. The property was beautiful, and this small ski town had so much to offer, even in the summertime. The trails were turned into mountain bike loops, and we got to explore the little shops and restaurants surrounding the lifts, even getting to ride the gondola for free and see the landscape. With the white snow melted and forgotten, the green landscape was shown off and illuminated in the sun, a welcoming view to start off this journey. We also did some nature hikes in the neighboring town of Fraizer, CO, which was amazing and pretty easy considering the rocky and dry terrain. I would definitely recommend checking out Winter Park on your next trip to Colorado!

We packed our bags and spent the next day on the road heading towards Wyoming. This drive was very laid back, and we saw lots of wildlife along the way, my favorite being the chipmunks that would run along the side of the streets.

Our first night was spent on an old rodeo location where the property owners turned their land into camp sites, this was called Jim Moss Arena, in Riverton Wyoming. I loved this place, and the group of people we met here too! The owners were wonderful people who cooked with us and let us hangout on their porch. While the views and location were beautiful, unfortunately this is where we ran into one of our biggest hiccups, which would haunt us for the rest of the trip. Out west, it is very windy, someone should've warned us, but thankfully I am warning you to not try and set up a tent in 30mph winds. After many trials and errors of being blown away and not being able to get our stakes into the rocky ground, we decided to give up, and sleep in the car that night, thankfully we were prepared for this. We used an inflatable mattress in the trunk for both riding purposes but also conveniently worked out for evenings in the car as well. For anyone committing to this long of a ride, I think you should consider adding a mattress like that to your packing list.

Our next segment of the trip was Yellowstone National Park, which was about a six-hour drive from our campsite, so we left early that morning to secure our next spot and explore the site before dinner time. The area was so beautiful, the tall mountains created beautiful valleys of fresh terrain and wildlife.

We stayed in Mammoth campgrounds the first night and got to see elk, hot springs, bears and take boardwalk hikes throughout the park, this was definitely one of my favorite locations. This campsite provided free showers, and we were able to rinse off for the first time since Winter Park, a luxury I took for granted because this was the only free water we came across the whole trip. Cooking in national parks can be quite annoying, something I wasn't aware of beforehand, but thankfully again, we came prepared. We used propane tanks with portable stove tops to make some excellent meals like taco bowls, burgers and hotdogs, along with breakfast tacos and sandwiches. Due to bears and other predators in the area, you are advised to keep all cooking utensils and any food or hygiene items in bear boxes provided on property. This was tricky to get used to, but worth it to protect yourself as well as other campers.



Grand Tetons National Park was up next. This was the most breathtaking place I have ever seen in my life; nothing can compare to the views of those peaks and the beautiful lakes and hiking trails that scatter the park. We stayed at the Colter Bay campsite, and I have only positive reviews. Our site was private, spacious, and close to showers, making every part of the trip easy and accessible. You do have to pay for showers and laundry at most places, but it is a reasonable price of only five dollars with hot water for 15 minutes.

We also visited Jenny Lake lookout and swimming area the next day when we stayed at Jenny Lake campground. The water was freezing, but we went swimming anyway. While we visited the lake, we also did a 7.1 mile hike up the main Teton and lookout point, at 7,000 elevation. This was a treacherous uphill climb that seemed to last for hours, I thought I wasn't going to make it. I was tired, hot, almost giving up with every step I took, but eventually we made it to the lookout point, and it was worth every second of pain. The weather was great here, hot during the day but perfectly cold during the night to get a good night's sleep after a lot of hard work throughout the days. I loved this part of the trip, Colter Bay and Jenny Lake are places to remember, and please, if you are ever in the area stay there!

Heading out of Wyoming we passed through Idaho, stopping for a pit stop to cross it off the list of states. We drove through Utah for roughly six hours from the Tetons, traveling to a little town outside of Salt Lake City called Bountiful, where we stayed at a free campground overlooking the city from a very dusty mountain top. This was another night spent in the car due to the wind, and if I'm honest a pretty scary night. Apparently, this spot was popular for high school parties, and we heard footsteps and cars passing by all night, my heart was racing, and I could barely sleep at all. Not my favorite spot, but it worked for the night, and we rewarded ourselves the next day with a Utah classic, Swig. This restaurant is like a Sonic, where they make interesting drink combinations, and we tried a few of the soda and flavors, would recommend for anyone who hasn't tried it After this, we drove straight into Moab to visit the Arches National Park. I do have to mention one pit stop, a small gas station right outside the park called "Jackass Joes." They had the coolest merch and souvenirs, making this a definite tourist location to stop into on your way to the park.

The arches were unreal, so incredibly beautiful and insanely large that standing under one was surreal, making me feel like an ant exploring a world of giants. We did a quick hike and explored one of the arches before driving around a bit, unfortunately we did not have much time to explore, because it was getting late, and it was so hot we couldn't even get out of the car much. We had a site outside of the park in Warner Lake. The scenery here was beautiful! There were thousands of aspen trees creating a magical hideout with wildlife everywhere! We saw bunnies and deer right next to our tent and had chipmunks all over the site! We had a peaceful night here without neighbors or even anyone bothering us at all.

Wrapping up our trip, for our last stop, we stayed in Durango Colorado on a sweet couple's property in the emptier part of town. I loved this site; we were the only campers there and the couple was awesome! There was an outhouse bathroom, and she informed us about showers in town at the YMCA. We got to learn a lot about the area and its history from them, and they welcomed us with open arms and amazing hospitality. We only had two

nights here, but we spent a whole day in Durango at Lake Nighthorse, there was a whole obstacle course on the water, where you could spend five dollars for an hour and a half of fun. This was awesome! I wish I could find pictures, but you'll have to take my word, it was worth it. We also explored some locations in New Mexico; we saw Lake Navajo and explored their marina and did a short hike around the property.

This was an experience worth a lifetime, every mistake and unprepared moment lead to a learning curve where we could not only take this information for next time but grow from it. It is important to do research before heading on a journey like this, so be sure to go prepared and aware of anything that could go wrong! I learned so much about wildlife, the west, national parks, and even camping. I will hold on to this for the rest of my life and hopefully will be back soon. For anyone considering travelling, or road tripping, do it! Money can come back but a trip like this was a once in a lifetime experience! Have fun and explore the world while you can, happy camping and safe travelling!

Lydia Barker

Rebecca Wall
Rebecca Wall
Rebecca Wall

“Peace on Wheels”

Wheels sing beneath my shifting feet,
A rhythmic pulse on sun-warmed street.
Gliding swift, the world turns bright,
Wind and laughter take to flight.

> Leaning left, I chase the spin,
> Gravity tugs, yet I still grin.
> Joy ignites in every roll,
> A dance of freedom, pure and whole.

Shadows stretch along my path,
Soft and fleeting in their math.
Each turn a sketch, each curve a line,
Drawn in motion, smooth and fine.

> The city's hum begins to fade,
> Trees applaud in leafy shade.
> Moments stretch like morning light,
> Boundless, weightless, taking flight.

No need for maps, no need for speed,
Just heart and wheels and open need.
A simple truth the silence seals,
The world is kind with peace on wheels.

Rae Bundrick

"Whispers of the Night"

In soft whispers, the night begins to sing,
The stars alight in dance across the sky.
A gentle breeze through silent trees takes wing.

> The moonlight weaves a silver, shimmering ring,
> While shadows stretch and softly breathe a sigh.
> In soft whispers, the night begins to sing.

The world lies still, yet dreams are taking flight,
As constellations hum their lullaby.
A gentle breeze through silent trees takes wing.

> The owl's call echoes-haunting, distant, lingering,
> Its melody is a question, asking why.
> In soft whispers, the night begins to sing.

The heart finds peace beneath the moon's bright eye,
Where time stands still, and worries fade and die.
A gentle breeze through silent trees takes wing.

Embrace the calm that only night can bring,
And let your spirit soar, unbound and high.
In soft whispers, the night begins to sing,
A gentle breeze through silent trees takes wing.

Chaniya Turner

“Come Join Me in the Sky”

What a breathtaking sight to see,
My body is vibrating and my hollow ears ring.
The sun sheds gold on my face, I feel alive,
No words could ever describe this liberating feeling,
Come join me in the sky,
Way up on a mountain top where we can all be free.

Soon we will all have the chance to be free,
The clouds are a sight for sore eyes to see.
Wander through the vibrant trees and aim for the sky,
Hear the morning birds chirp and their melodies ring,
Oh, what is this feeling?
This is why humans ache to be alive.

Why else would you want to be alive?
Would you work at a job where you will never be free?
A life where nobody understands your feelings,
If you escape the cycle, you will finally see,
No distraction could mask these glorious rings,
Hear the mountains as they sing to the sky.

The stars look beautiful while they twinkle in the sky,
The moon is shining in a way that is alive,
If you listen closely to the cricket's ring,
Close your eyes and let your mind be free,
Life doesn’t seem so bad for those who can see.
No words could describe this feeling.

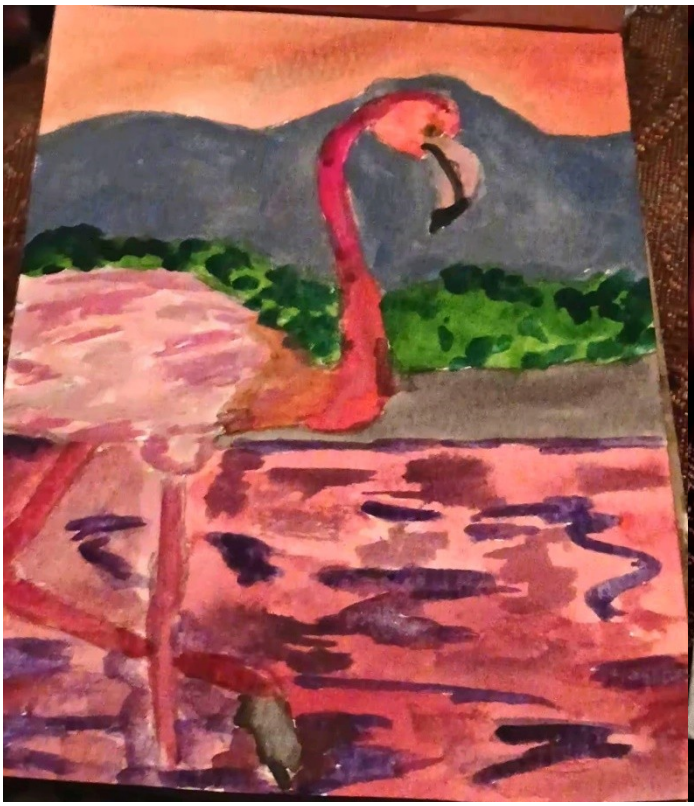
This is an unimaginable feeling,
The kind that people pray for at the sky,
Release your baggage and prepare to see,

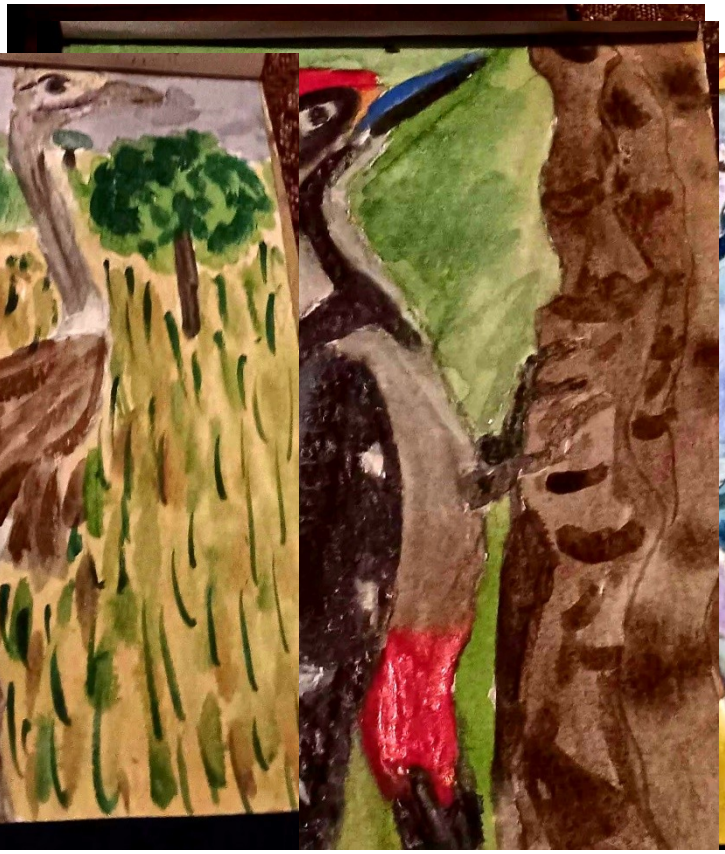
Once you arrive, you'll be thankful to be alive,
Run through the hills and rejoice, you're free!
Alas, hear the morning birds go *ring ring ring.*

> Once again, the wind rustles and my ears ring,
> Do you finally understand this feeling,
> How does it feel to be completely free?
> Did you say your prayers and thank the sky?
> Now you know what it means to be alive,
> Your eyes have opened and now you can see.

A smile graces my face as the birds begin to ring,
The sun is rising and igniting this feeling,
Come join me in the mountains where we can be free.

Lydia Barker





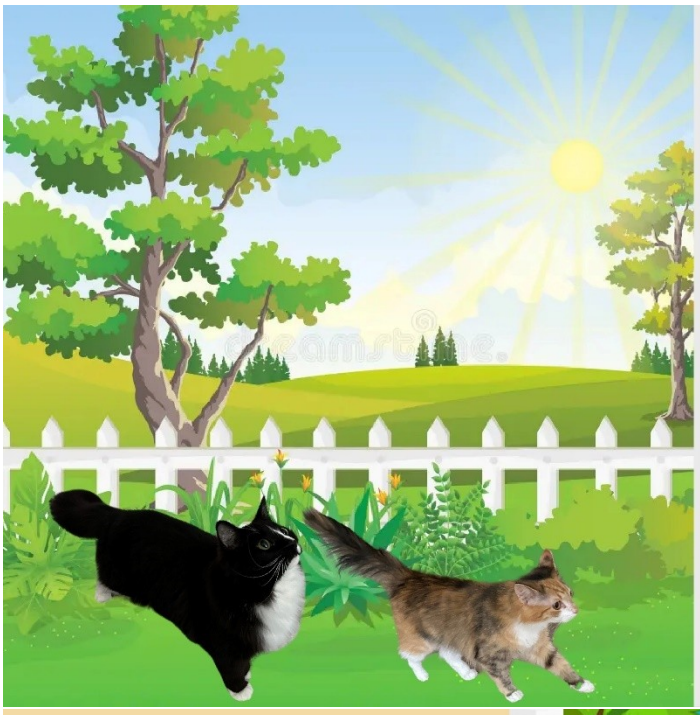
YGO

Sunlight spread across the vast open sky.

“Let’s go!” said Hazel. “Let’s play outside!”

Vader stretched his body and let out a deep sigh.

“Alright, but no chasing butterflies...”



Out they went, paws on the grass,

Hazel sped past him at high speed while he chased after her.

Vader blinked in the morning light,

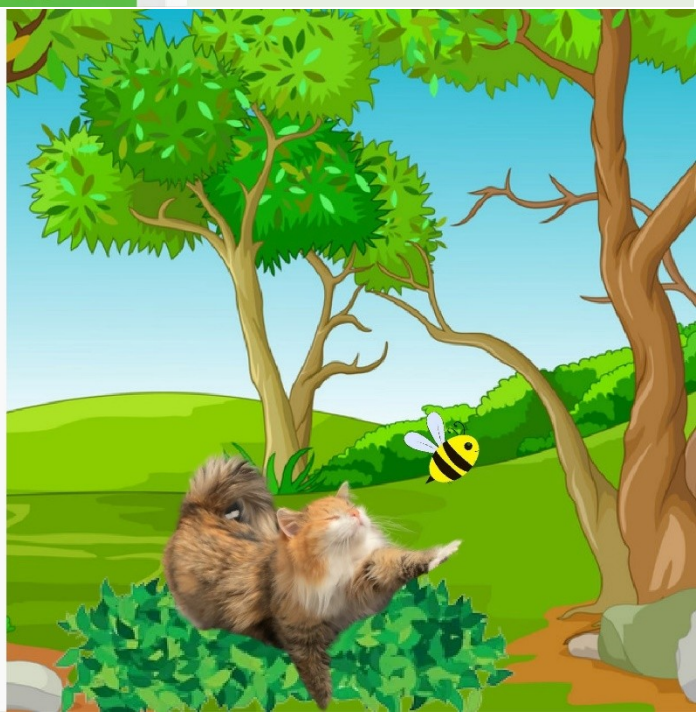
He liked his world calm... not quite this bright.

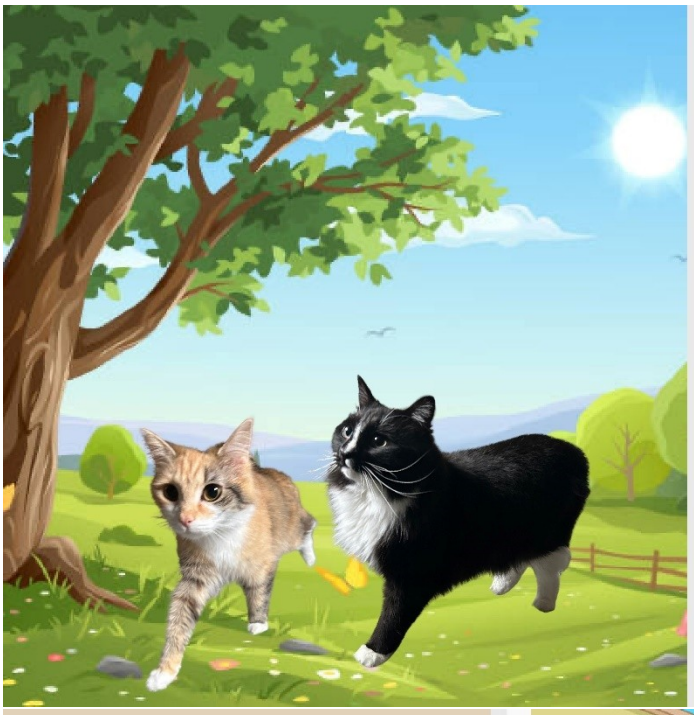
A buzzing bee became Hazel's next target.

“Careful!” said Vader. “Let it be!”

She jumped at her target but completely missed it.

Then landed gently in a pile of leaves.





The animals enjoyed the scented wind as they observed the trees.

They chased their shadows with wiggly knees.

Hazel rolled, all full of glee,

“Catch me, Vader! Try to catch me!”

The pair leaped between the tall green grass while they played.

They took a break in the cool, cool shade.

Vader groomed his tuxedo fur,

Hazel taking a break before her next adventure

She found a stick! She found a bug!

She took a leaf and gave it a hug.

Vader laughed (well, kind of a smirk),

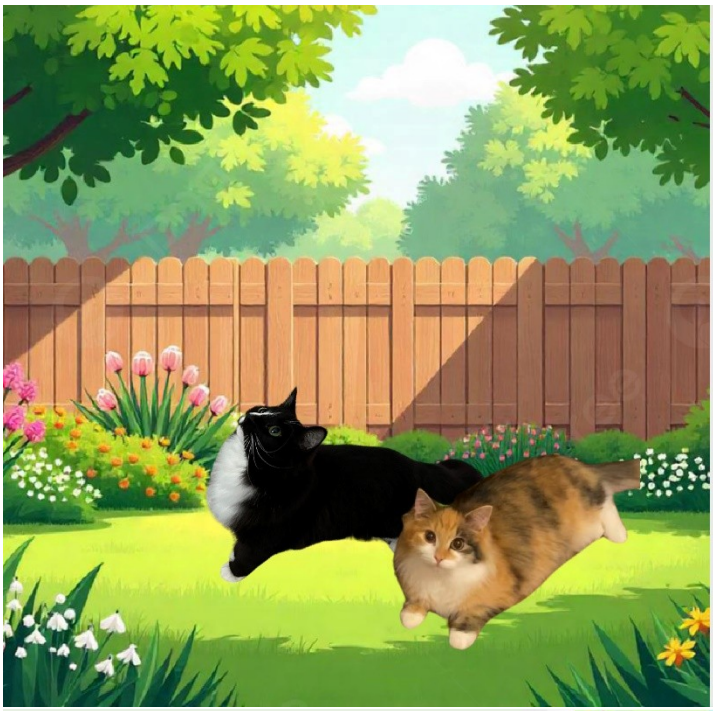
And flicked his tail with a look that worked.

Then something moved in the tree...

“A squirrel!” cried Hazel. “Look at me!”

She ran, she jumped, she tried to fly,

The squirrel managed to fly beyond Hazel's reach into the sky.



Vader strolled, all nice and slow,

He found a patch where flowers grow.

Hazel flopped right on her side,

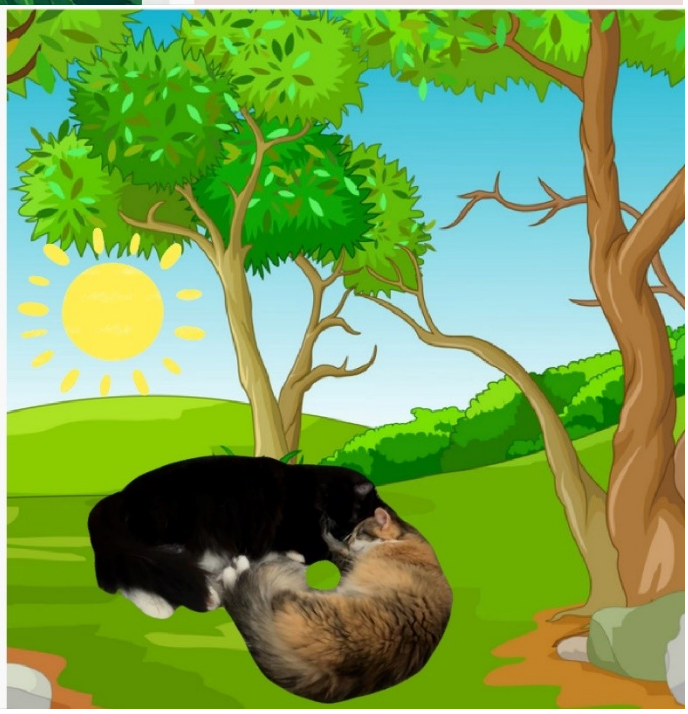
She yawned, “This is the best outside!”

They rested in the sunlight as they dreamed about fish.

Of flying cats and a tuna dish.

The clouds rolled by, the birds all flew,

The sun was shining when Hazel said, “Let’s come back soon!”



So Vader blinked his sleepy eyes,

Hazel observed the butterflies

They spent the entire day playing

Just two best friends, side by side.

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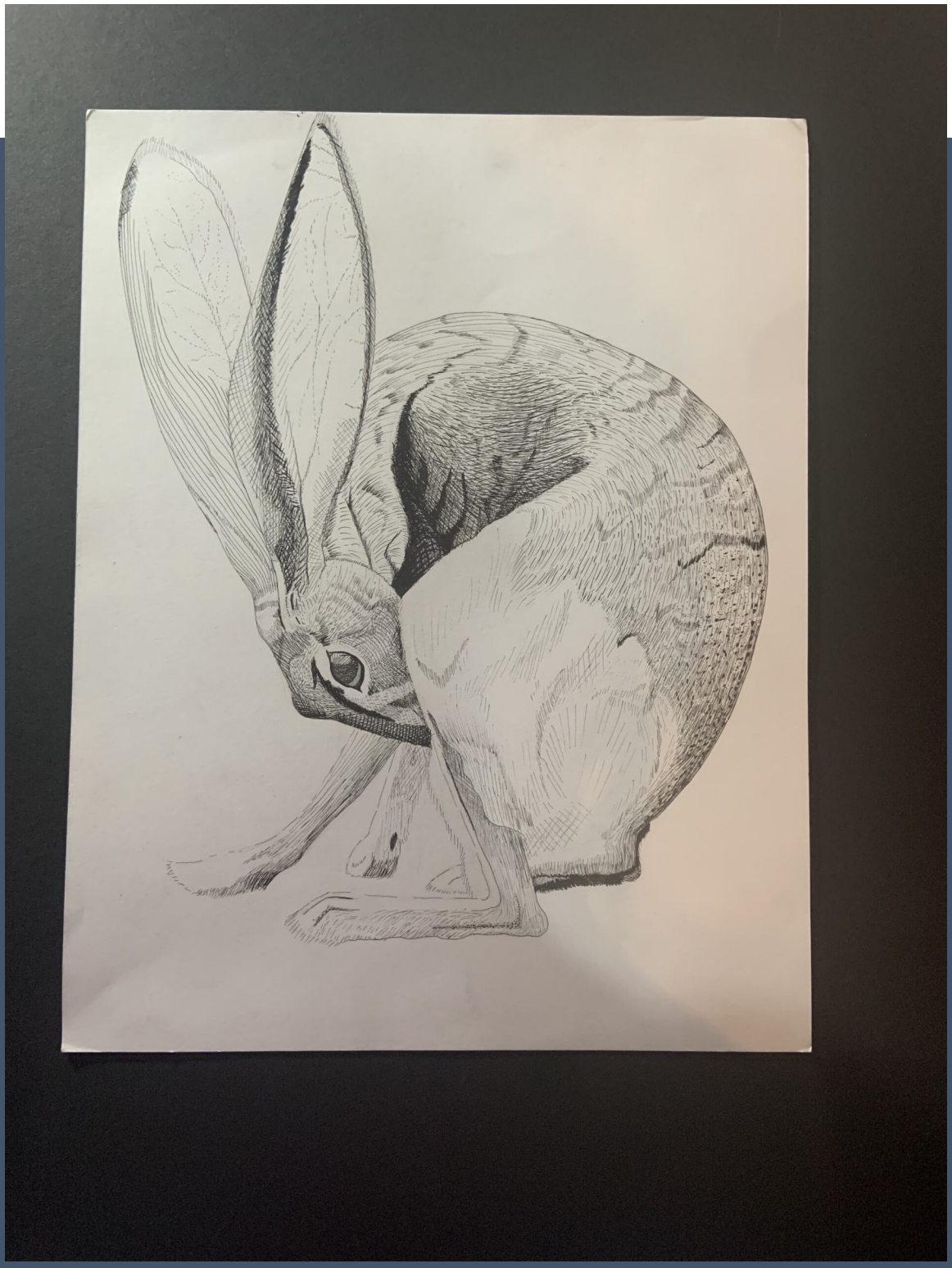

Learning

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READ IT TO BEAT IT
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“Again! The Power of Repetition in Children’s Literature”

When I was a kid, one of my favorite books was *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom.* After a while, my mother had read it so much that she had fully memorized that book. When I would ask her to read it while she was doing dishes, I got tasked with “turning the pages for her” while she recited it perfectly from memory. Another classic in my house was *We’re Going on a Bear Hunt,* and bedtime reading was not complete without my dad singing the title phrase and making sound effects for all the elements the fictious family had to overcome. And I doubt and truly happy childhood reading time could happen without one of the many groovy Pete the Cat books. You probably recognize some of these stories, but what do they all have in common? Each of these books, like many others, heavily use repetition throughout the book. The same phrases and words used over and over again are what make these books so widely popular, but why did the authors choose that method? I can tell you, it’s not because they were lazy or negligent of their audience. Instead, they are writing something called a predictable book. The Illinois Early Learning Project defines this type of book by saying “A predictable book is one that features patterns, sequences, and connections in the illustrations or words that enable children to guess “what comes next” in the story.” (“Using Predictable Books...”). Looking at the example of the picture book *Pete the Cat: I Love My White Shoes,* the song “I love my white shoes, I love my white shoes, I love my white shoes” is sung at the beginning of the story. When Pete steps in messes he exclaims “oh no” and his shoes change to a new color. The narrator prompts, “did Pete cry?” and responds with a certain, “goodness no!” The colors of the text and illustrations make it simple for readers to insert the new color of the shoes into the song, and they eagerly sing along “I love my_____ shoes”. These patterns and easy-to-follow structures are what make up predictable books. Predictable books are not only just fun but provide a great deal of benefits when used to teach emerging readers in both the typical and special education classroom.

The first major way that predictable books are used effectively is in teaching early readers. As will be seen, using predictable texts with early readers boosts their confidence in their abilities to read, comprehension of the text, and motivation to engage with text. Lynn K. Rhodes explains that children can begin to engage with predictable books from the very first time they encounter them. She demonstrates this using the example of a teacher reading to her first-grade class. “With no further introduction, she began to read The Bus Ride aloud, holding the book so the children could see the illustrations. After the second page, some children had begun to read along and by the fifth page, all were Reading." (Rhodes, p. 3). By the end of the book, Rhodes tells us that the children are filling in blanks in repeated sentences and relating to the characters. This demonstrates not only that the children are confident in their understanding of the material, but also enthusiastic about the story. Raquel Cuperman gives insight into how children grow excited as they understand what’s coming next in the story, “During the read-aloud of Little Robin’s Christmas (Fearnley, 2002) with kindergartners, a girl exclaimed, “I got it! The days until Christmas day are the same number of vests still left.” The same thing happened months later with even

younger students with the book The Seven Chinese Brothers (Mahy and Tseng, 1992) when a girl spoke out proudly, “Of course one week! there are seven brothers, seven days of the week!” (Cuperman p.1). So why do students get so enthusiastic about engaging with predictable books? Gail Thompson and MaryBeth Webeler suggest that students comprehend these books through a process of critical thinking. “It involves a three-step cycle: sampling, predicting, and confirming"(Thompson and Webeler p. 498). They call this “the prediction cycle.” Using predictable books, early readers hypotheses can be confirmed again and again, boosting their confidence as readers right off the bat. Clearly, predictable books are effective in engaging new readers, but how are these books impactful to other demographics?

A huge and timeless discussion among educators is “how can we help students with disabilities?” Predictable books offer a potential way to engage this demographic in a way that will help them succeed. An article by Carole Keough explains that traditional reading instruction texts while being more effective among typical readers does not always work with disabled students the article details this saying, “Unfortunately, they (disabled students) often are unable to extract meaning from fragmented language instruction and the nonsensical linguistic pattern of basal stories.” (p.1). It’s easy to see how disabled children could fall through the cracks, however, Keough goes on to discuss how predictable books could provide an alternative to basal texts by saying, “... using predictable stories and related activities will approach young disabled readers with a variety of meaningful language experiences. Through these experiences, they will be able to effectively read, make inferences, draw conclusions and answer questions related to the written passages. Ultimately, the students will begin to perceive reading comprehension as a process of predicting, confirming and integrating meaning from the text by using semantic, syntactic and graphic cues in varying degrees and combinations. (Keough p. 32). Predictable books give disabled learners the opportunity to build skills that a basal reader might not provide for them. PattyLou Shields affirms this in her study by saying, “The use of repeating patterns and rhyming words allowed them to predict what the next word or words would be. This not only gave these students self-confidence in being able to read fluently, but in the use of phonetic rules.” (Shields pp. 27-28. Now that the undeniable benefits of using predictable books in early reading instruction have been discussed, let’s look at what the drawbacks of predictable books are.

A theme seen across discussions of predictable book use in the classroom is word learning. While predictable books offer a wide range of benefits for early readers, it is noticed again and again that these books don’t aid vocabulary growth. Francine Johnson did a study on the effects of predictable books when used to teach early readers and found that while these materials worked very well for starting the reading journey, if used solely will hinder further growth. She says, “Predictable reading materials offer a number of advantages. They support young readers' earliest attempts to read by reducing the need for extensive word recognition through patterned repetitive language that is easy to anticipate and remember. Yet these very advantages may not work to facilitate the acquisition of words that can be used to support the readers' efforts in the nonpredictable materials they will encounter as they grow as readers.

The tension between contextual support on the one hand and attention to print on the other is one that teachers must maintain as they work with beginning readers.” (Johnson p. 6). She goes on to suggest that using a word bank activity coupled with these materials could produce significantly improved word acquisition. Other studies, however, contest this claim and say that predictable books prove more effective in word learning than traditional basal methods. Phyllis Boeding analyzed a 1983 study done on the effectiveness of basal materials versus predictable books. She says, “The students using the predictable materials learned significantly more target words and non-target words than the control group. The control group relied on "sounding out" new words whereas the experimental group were risk takers, skipping the new word, reading to the end, and using context clues.” (Boeding p. 7) This conflict of results goes further than predictable books though. Maria Ceprano explains that sight word learning is highly debated. She tells us, “The research goals sound simple enough. However, the results have been complex and conflicting. At times the pictures seemed to distract children's attention from the words themselves, yet under other circumstances the pictures appeared to help children learn certain types of words better or to transfer their word recognition to related reading tasks.” (Ceprano p. 315). This shows us that while predictable books can be controversial in aiding students’ vocabulary, this discussion goes far beyond specific types of books and is more about the very basis of how word learning is taught. Perhaps there is no right answer for how vocabulary should be taught. What works for some children might not work for others and a blend of different teaching methods might be needed to reach students where they are.

Predictable books have proved not just to be fan favorites, but also to be a powerful tool in early reading instruction. Despite the agitation of getting “We’re Going on a Bear Hunt” stuck in your head, predictable books with catchy, repeating, and ear worm-y patterns could be an important asset for the next generation of teachers. Not only do these books prove effective in the typical classroom, but they could also provide a number of benefits in the ever-evolving special education classroom. The main drawback to using predictable books is the uncertainty of their effectiveness in expanding the word learning of the early reader. It is important to remember though, that whether vocabulary should be taught in isolation or in context is the larger argument. Studies have provided inconsistent results and the uncertainty surrounding the question should not negate the overall advantages of using predictable books with early readers. Predictable books have proved to be greatly helpful in reading instruction among typical and disabled students and when paired with different word learning methods, could hold even more success in reaching every student.

Alexis Stoudemire

Works Cited

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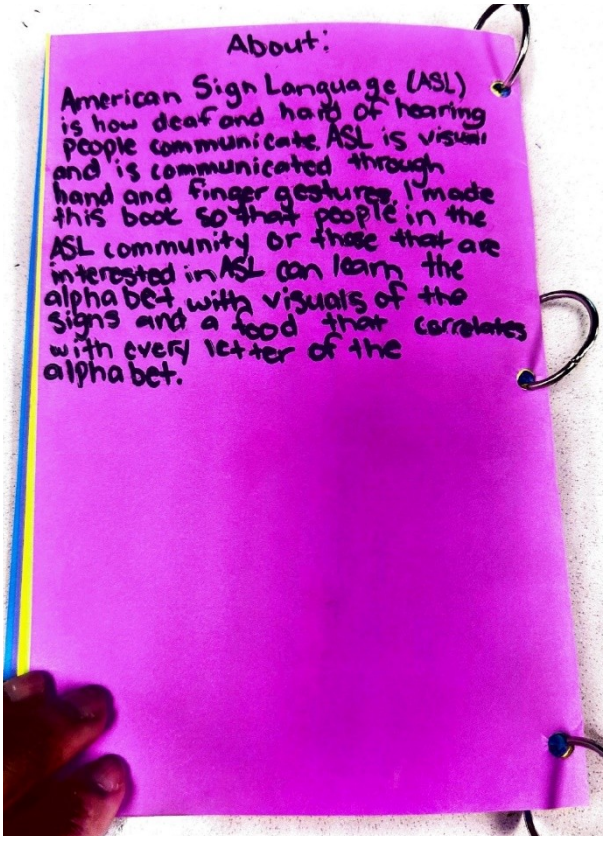
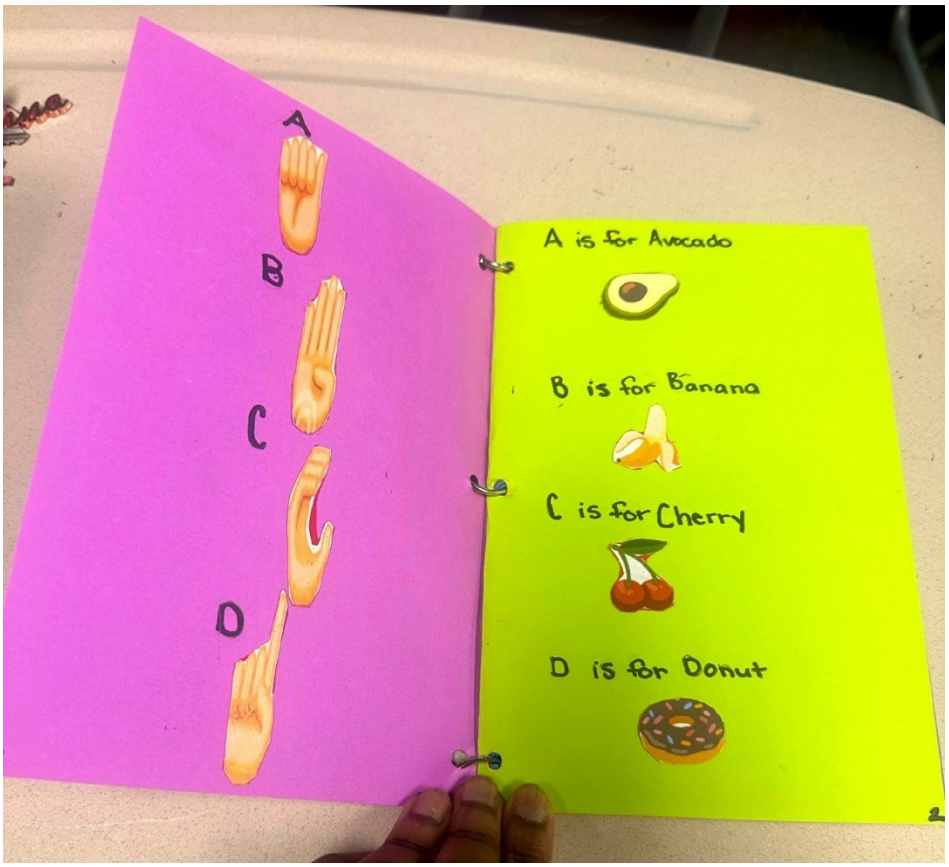
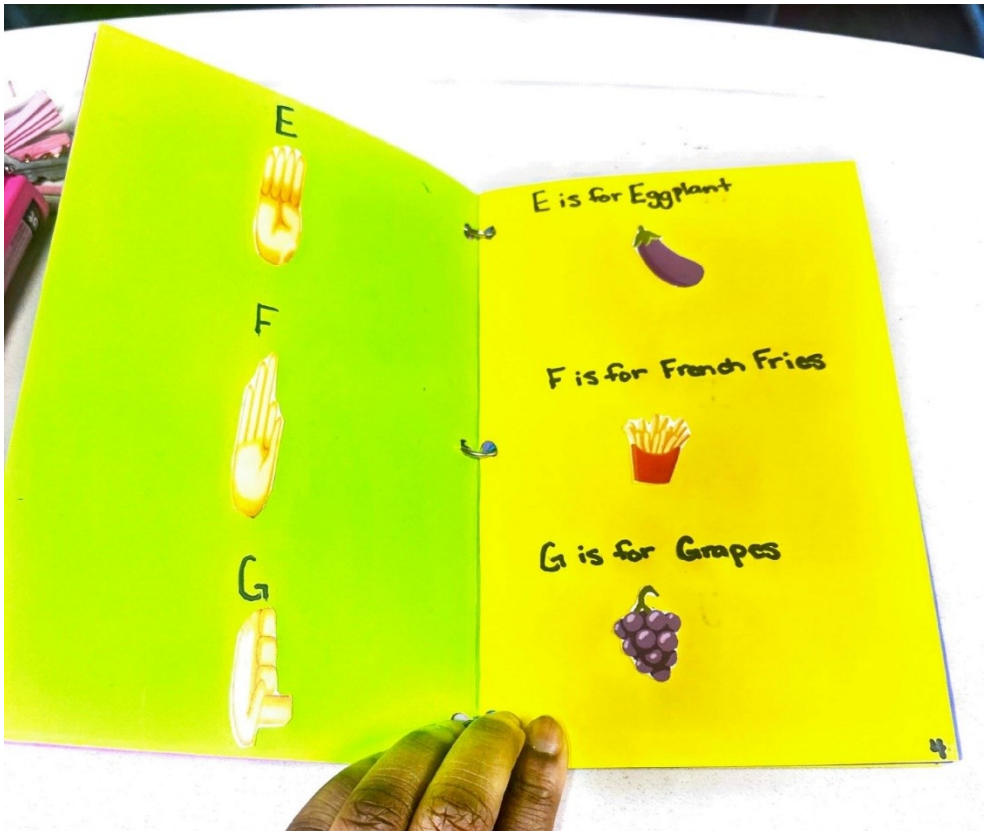
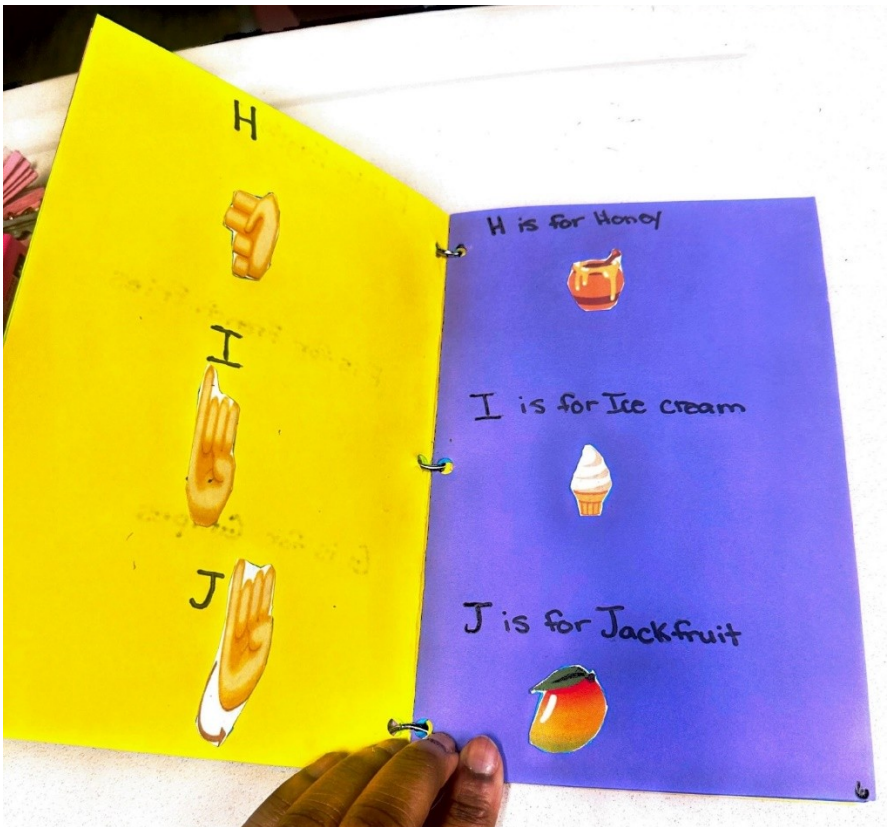
http://www.jstor.org/stable/20197982. Accessed 22 Apr. 2025.

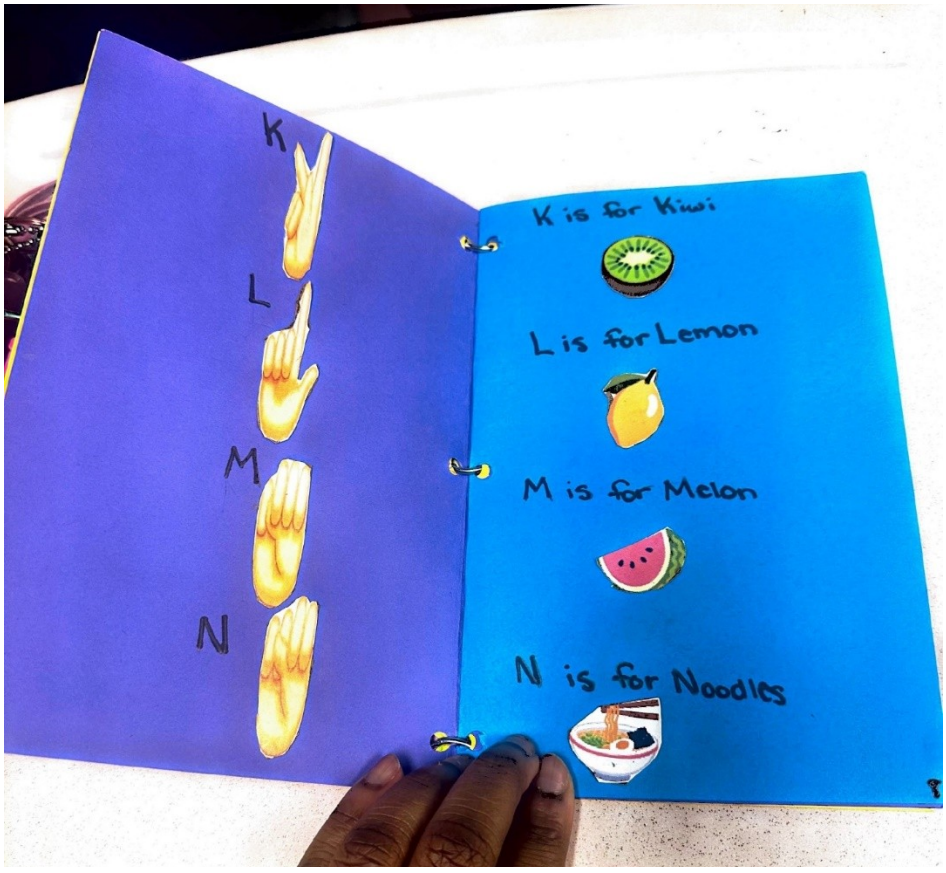
Tasty Signs:
A Feast of
Food & Fingers
Brianna
Mickie

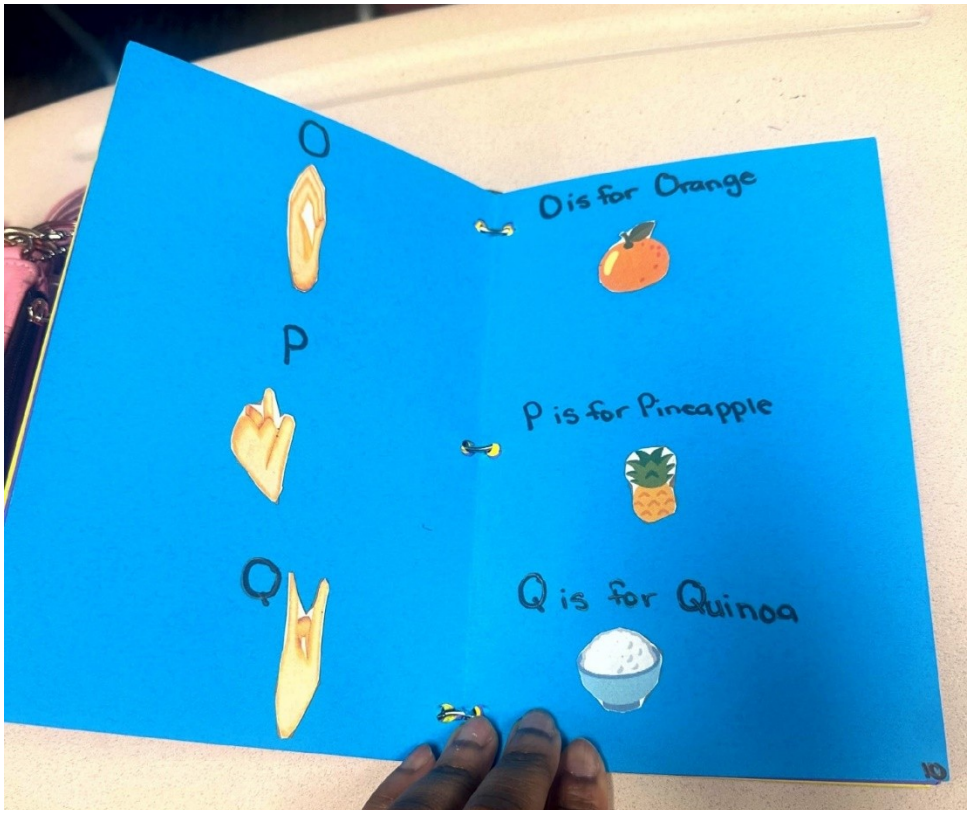

About:
American Sign Language (ASL)
is how deaf and hard of hearing
people communicate. ASL is visual
and is communicated through
hand and finger gestures. I made
this book so that people in the
ASL community or those that are
interested in ASL can learn the
alphabet with visuals of the
signs and a food that correlates
with every letter of the
alphabet.

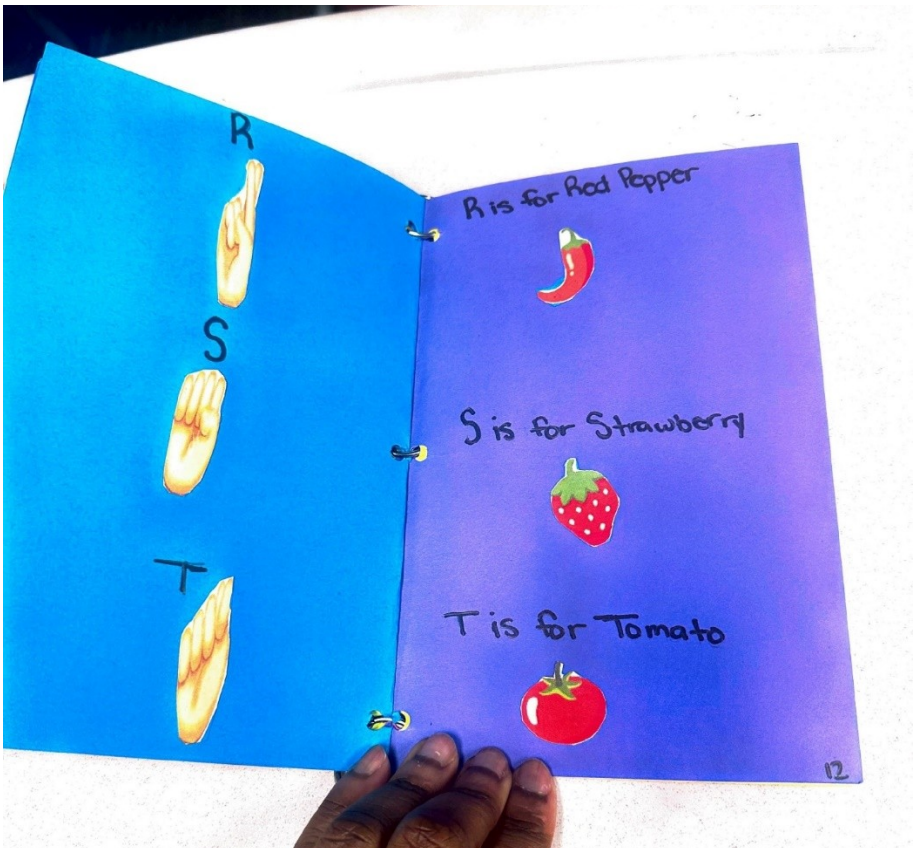

A
B
C
D
A is for Avocado
B is for Banana
C is for Cherry
D is for Donut

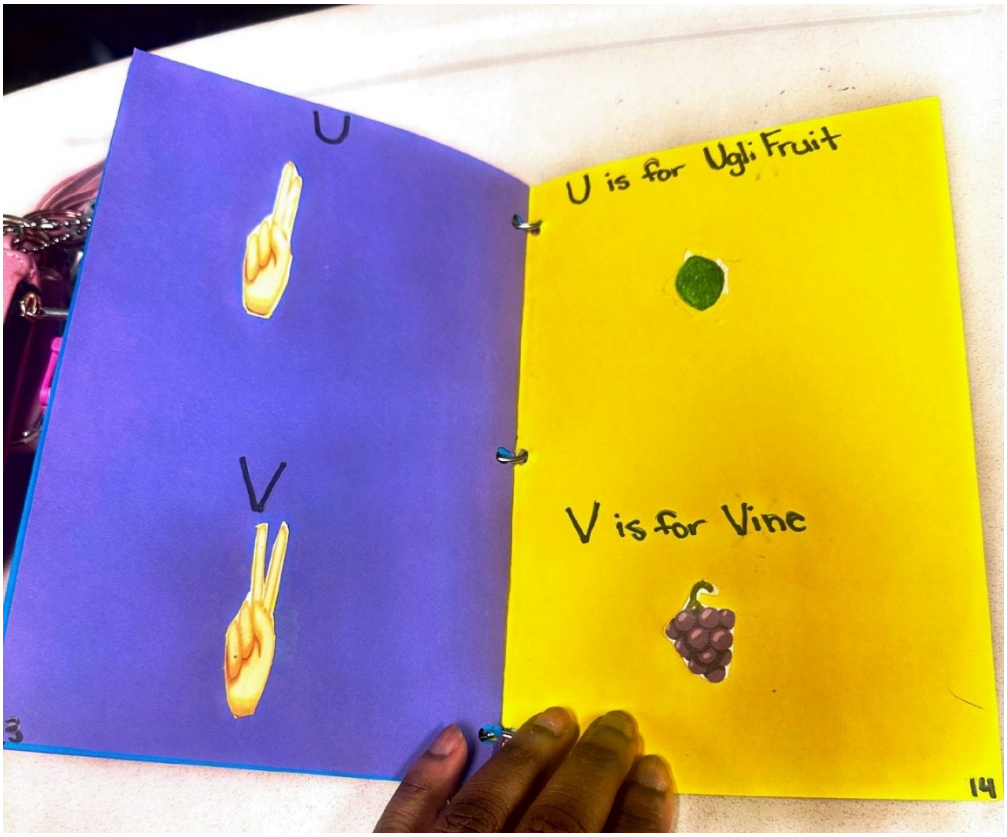

E
F
G
E is for Eggplant
F is for French Fries
G is for Grapes

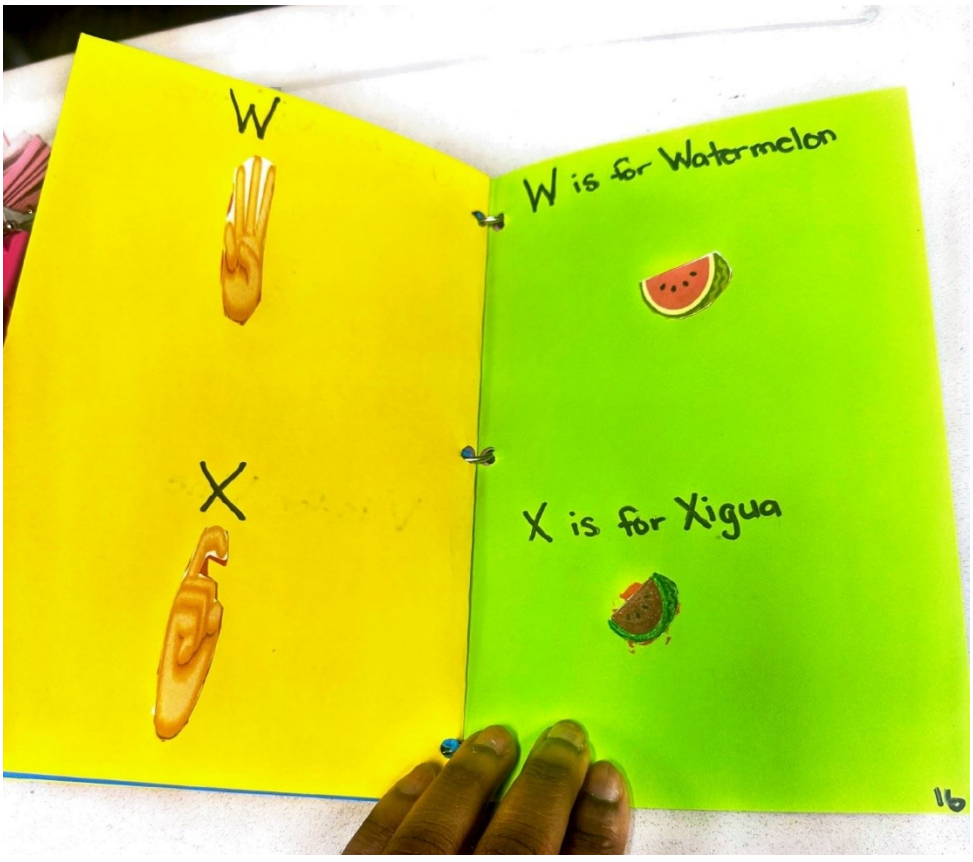

H
I
J
H is for Honey
I is for Ice cream
J is for Jackfruit

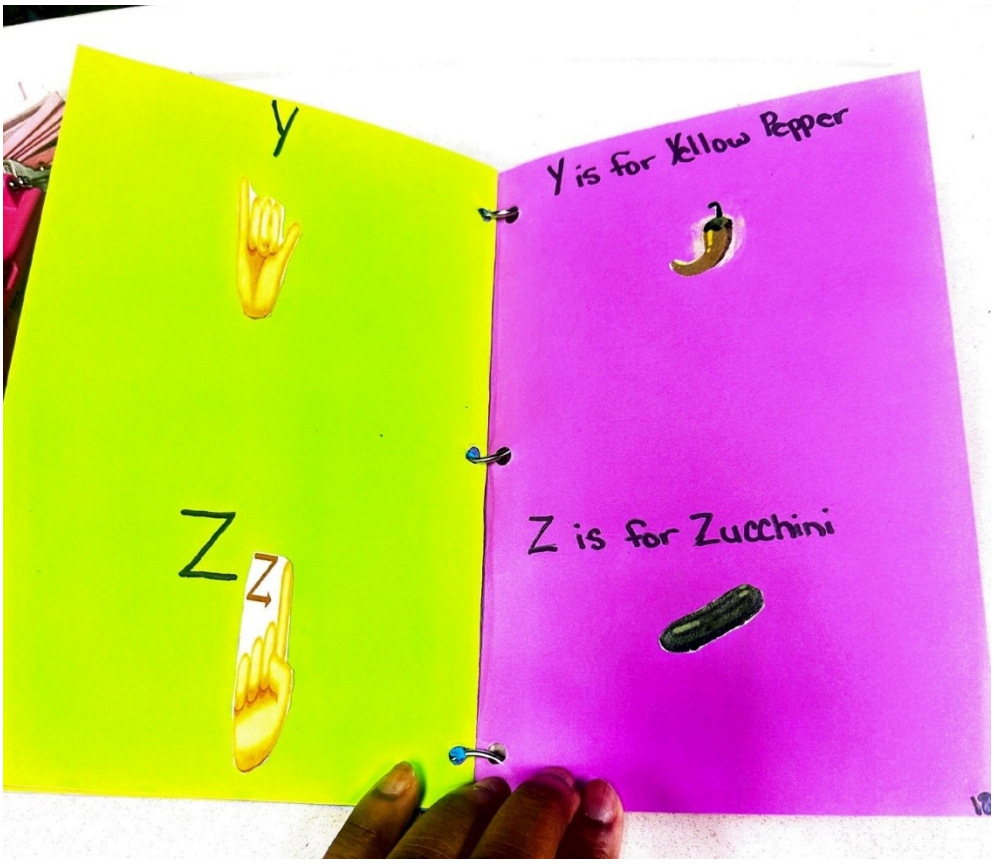

K
L
M
N
K is for Kiwi
L is for Lemon
M is for Melon
N is for Noodles


O
P
Q
O is for Orange
P is for Pineapple
Q is for Quinoa
10


R
S
T
R is for Red Pepper
S is for Strawberry
T is for Tomato
12

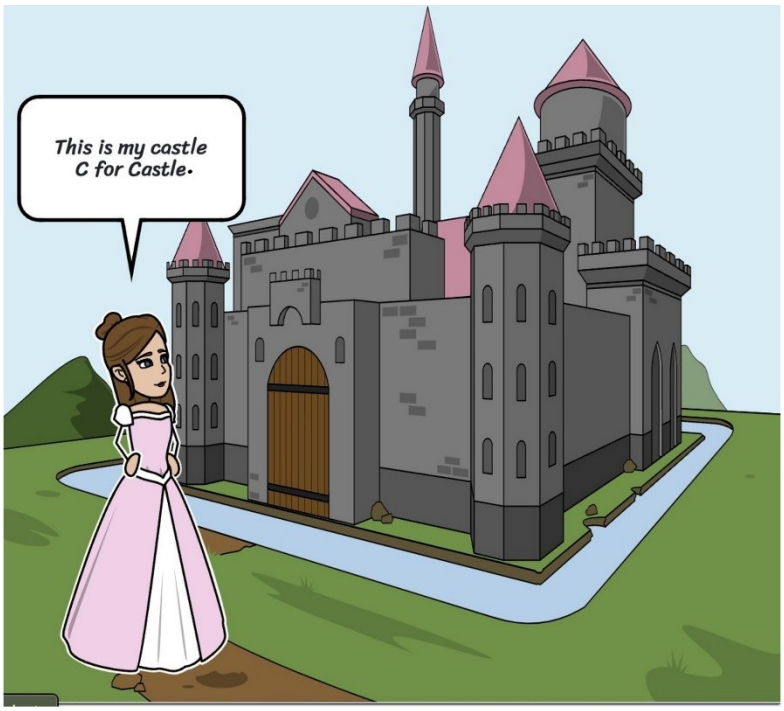

U
V
U is for Ugli Fruit
V is for Vine
14


W
X
W is for Watermelon
X is for Xigua
16

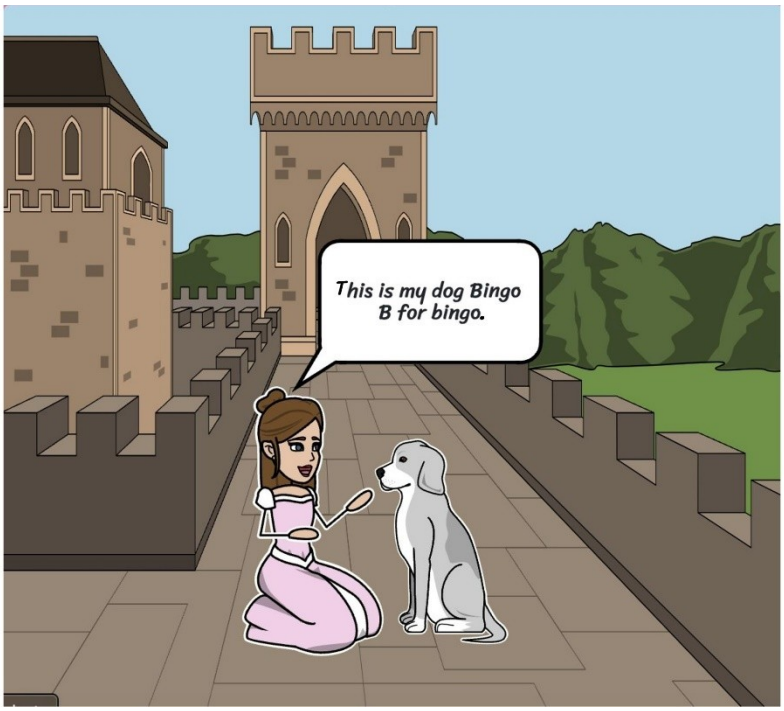

Y
Y is for Yellow Pepper
Z
Z
Z is for Zucchini

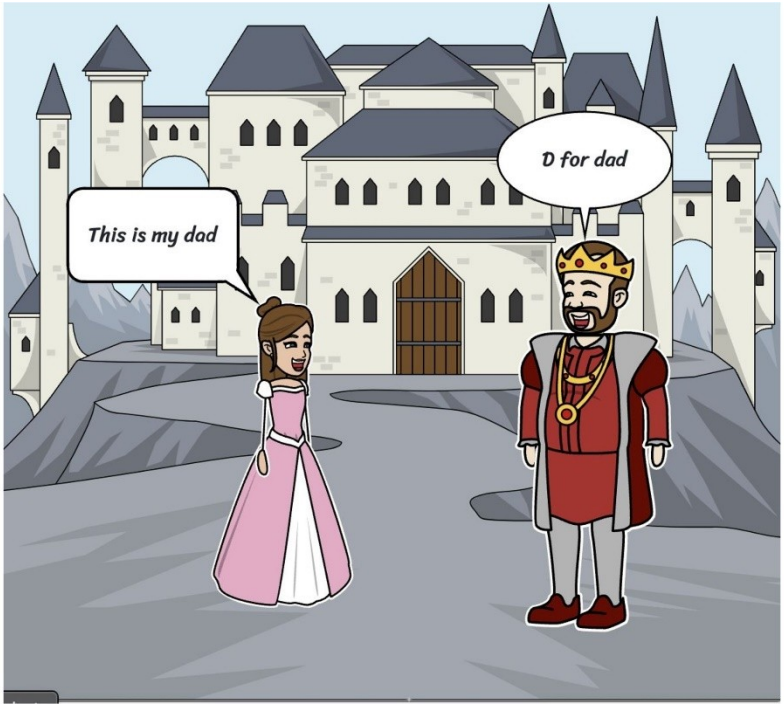
Princess Eva's alphabet book
By: McKenzie Page

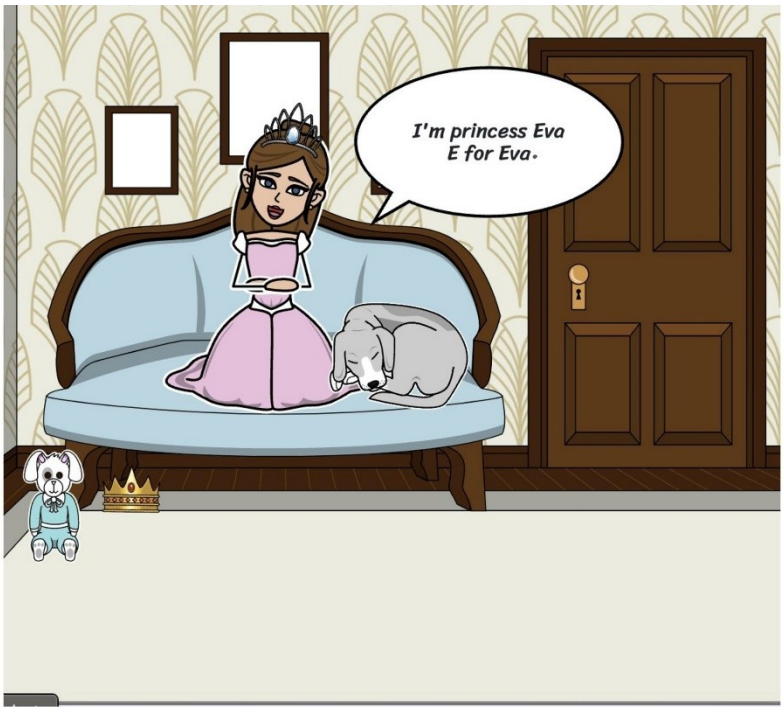
Hi I'm princess Eva and I'm gonna learn the alphabet today.


This is my castle
C for Castle.

This is my friend princess Alex
A for Alex


This is my dog Bingo
B for bingo.


This is my dad
D for dad


I'm princess Eva
E for Eva.

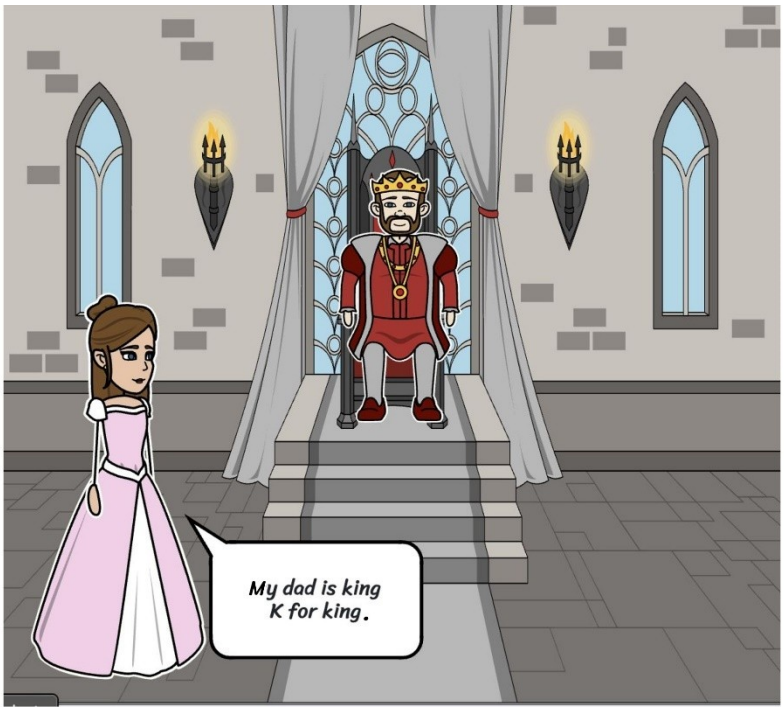
This is my family
F for family.

This is my game room
G for game

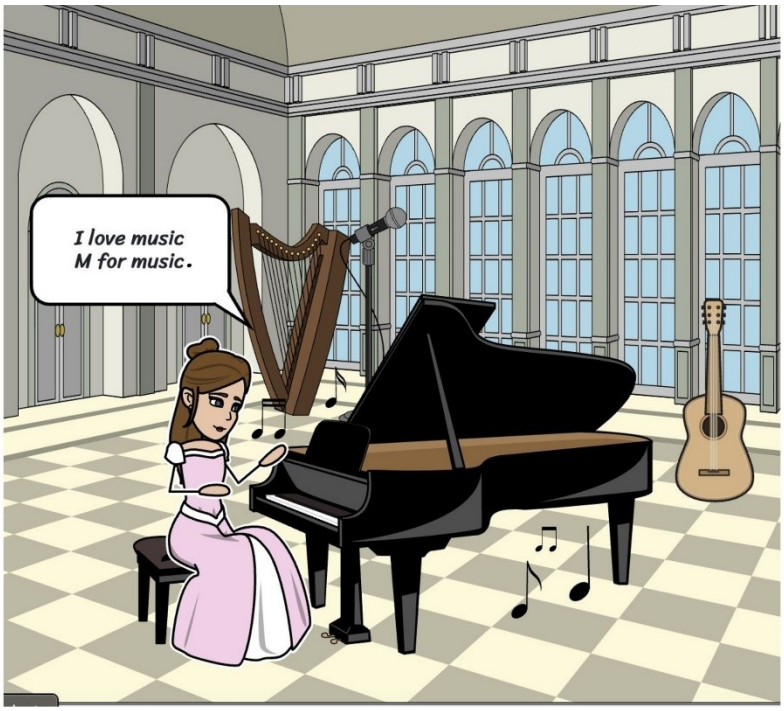
Theses are my bunnies they hop
H for hop.

We love ice cream
I for ice cream.

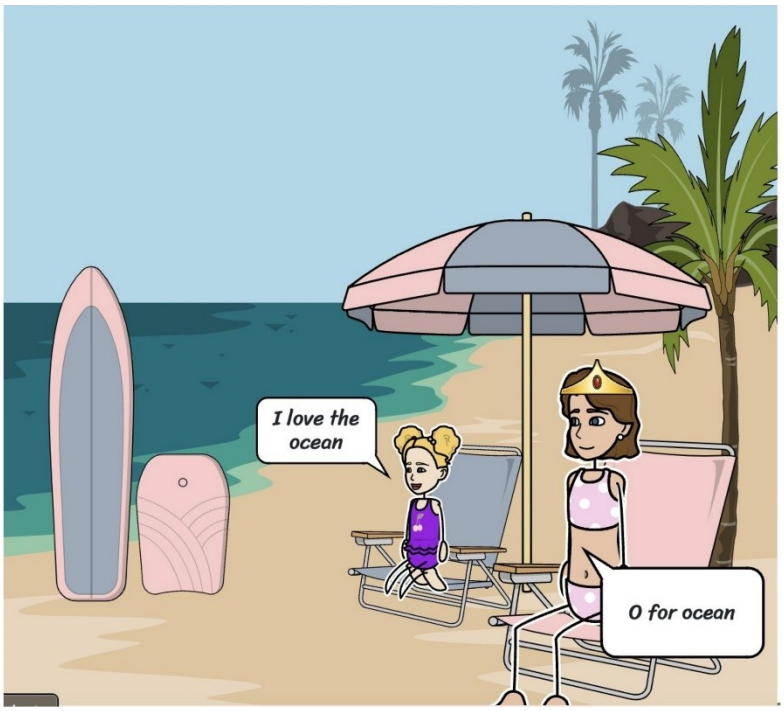
I love to jump
J for jump.

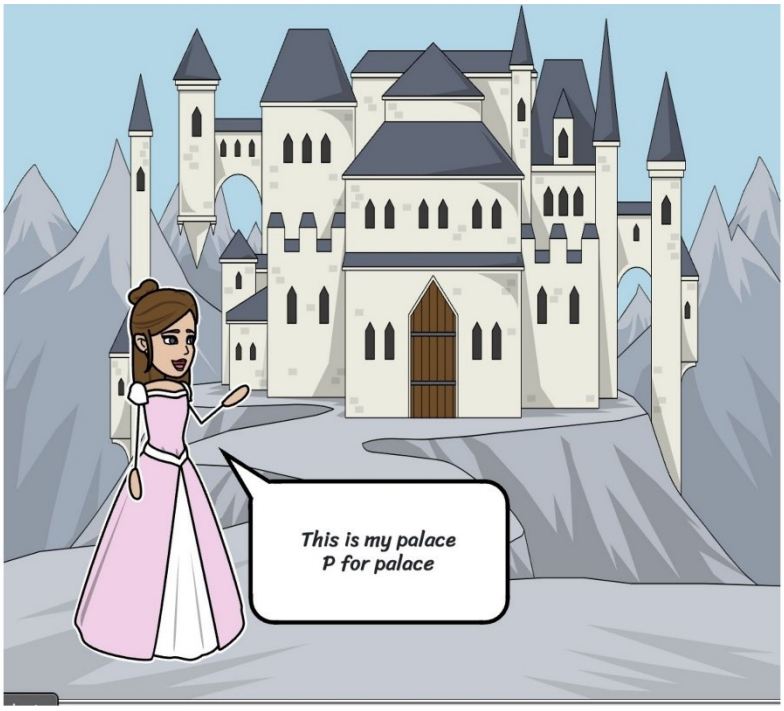

My dad is king
K for king.

I like to be lazy
sometimes
L for lazy.


I love music
M for music.

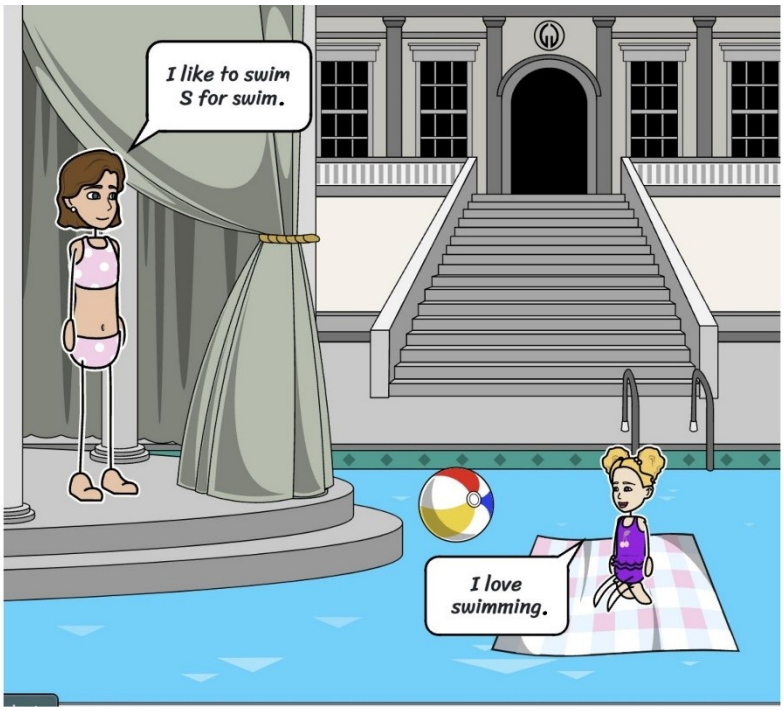
I love night time
N for night.


I love the ocean
O for ocean


This is my palace
P for palace

Hi
This is my mom the queen
Q for queen.

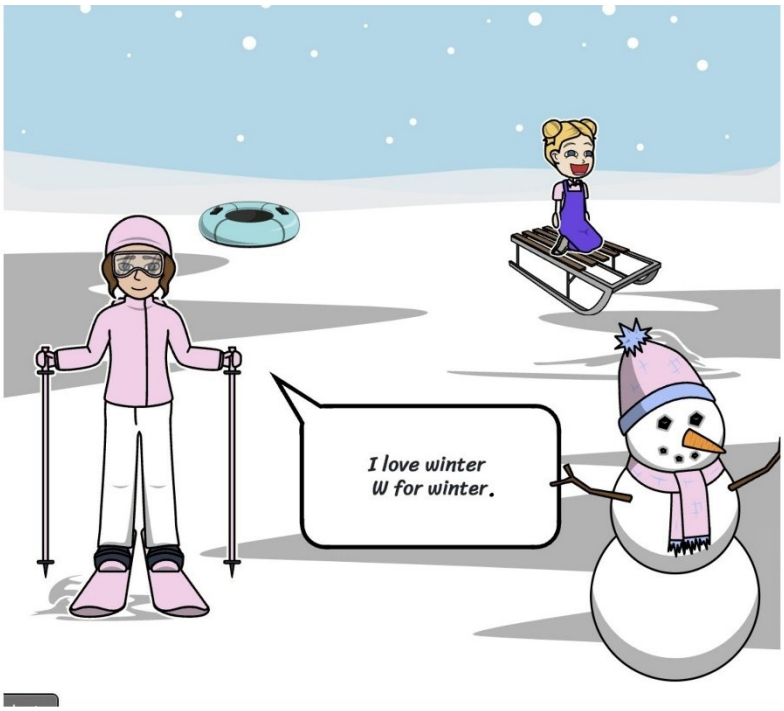
I love roses
R for roses.


I like to swim
S for swim.
I love
swimming.

I always have tea
T for tea.

Unicorns are my favorite U for unicorn.

I always eat my vegetables V for vegetables.


I love winter
W for winter.

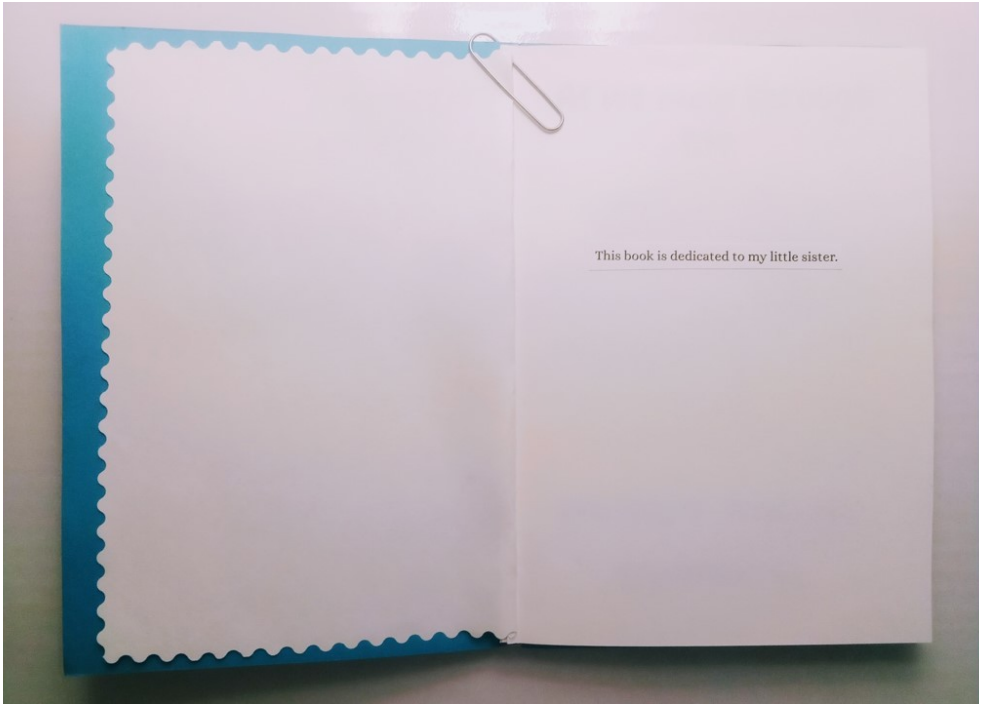
I had to get a X-ray
X for X-ray.

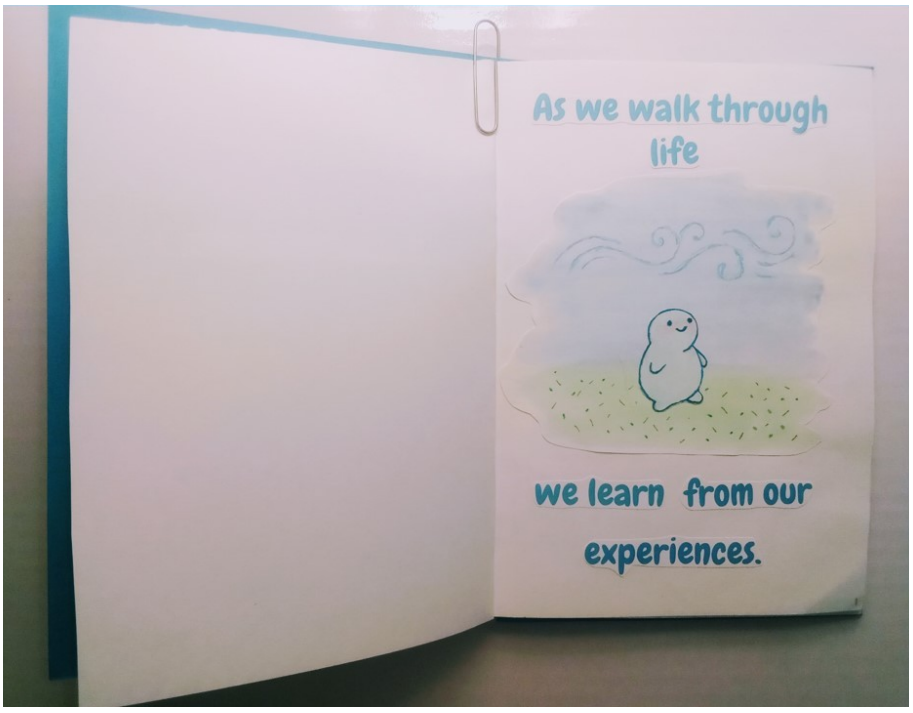
HAPPY NEW YEAR
Y for year.

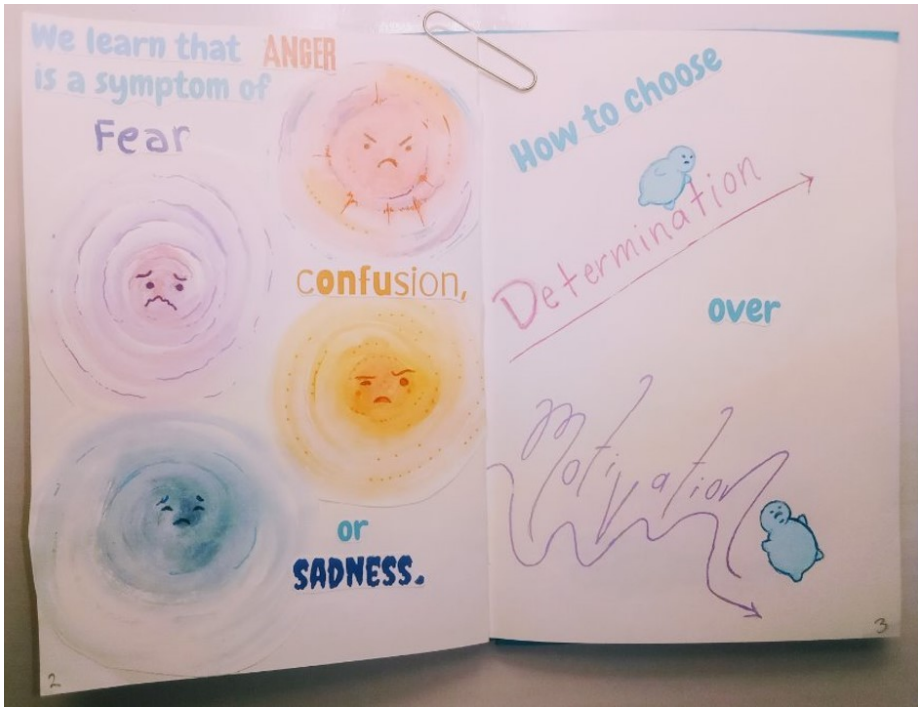
I love the zoo
Z for zoo.

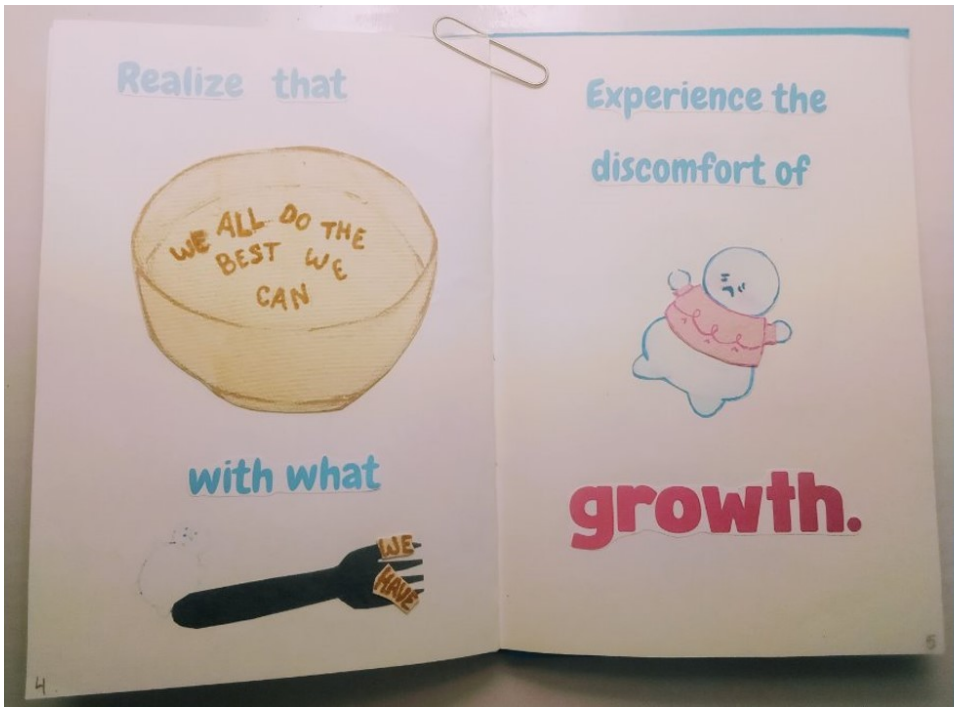
THE END
Thank you for learning with me.

Experience

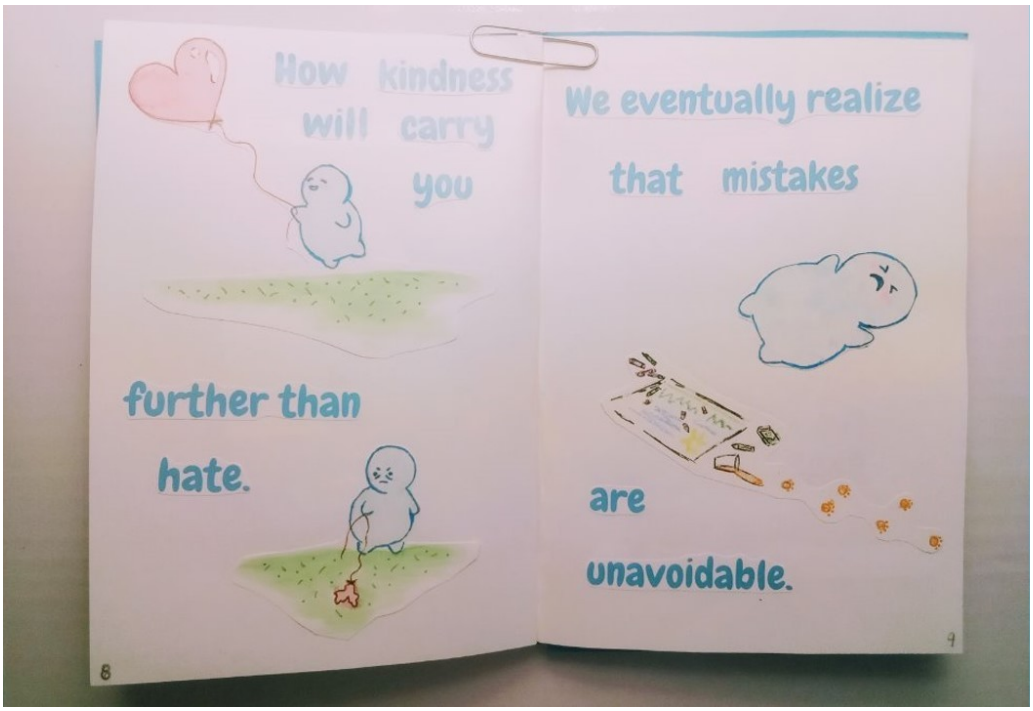

This book is dedicated to my little sister.

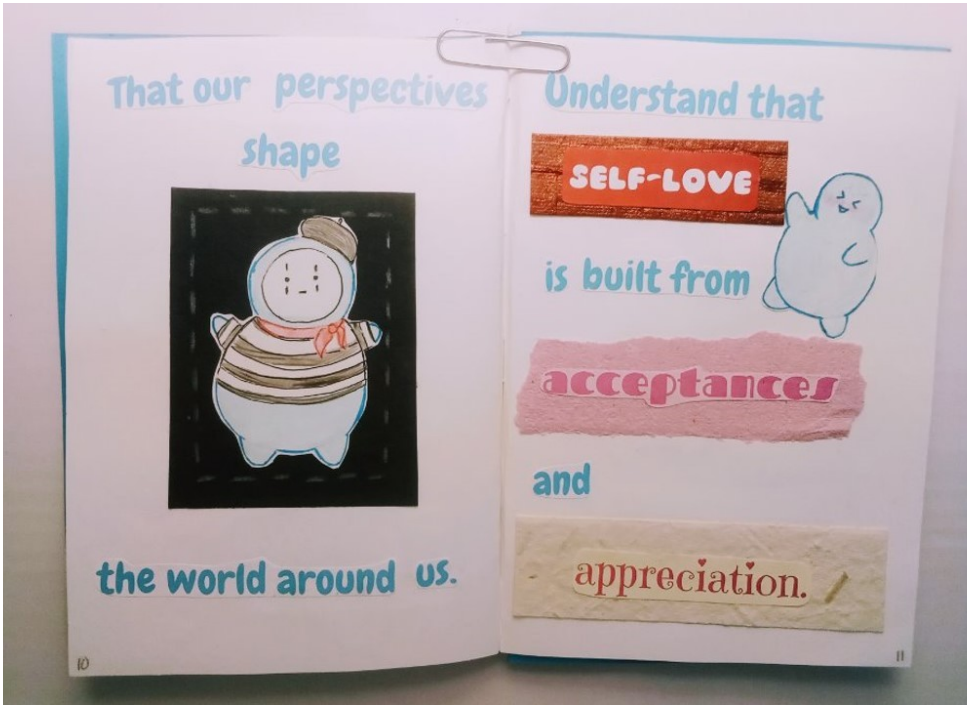

As we walk through life
we learn from our experiences.


We learn that ANGER is a symptom of
Fear
confusion,
or
SADNESS.
How to choose
Determination
over
Motivation
2
3


Realize that
WE ALL DO THE BEST WE CAN
with what
WE HAVE
Experience the discomfort of
growth.
4
5

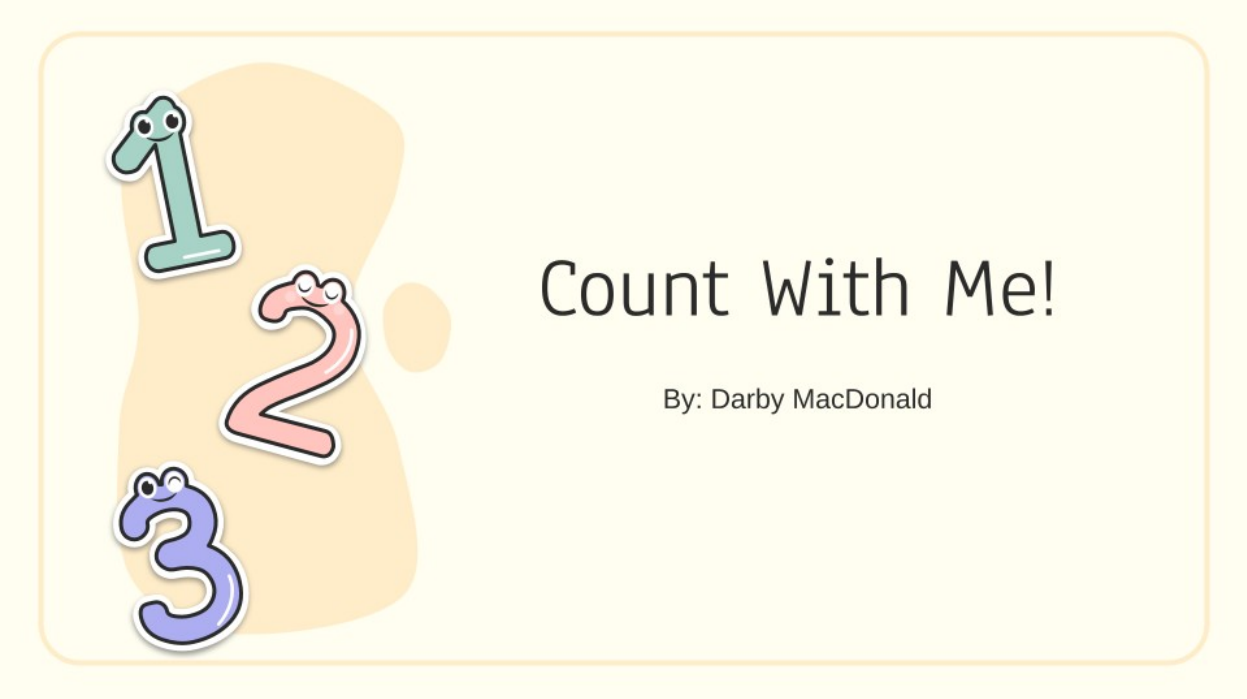
Witness how hurt people
hurt people.
How to use
better judgement.
6
7


How kindness will carry you
further than hate.
We eventually realize that mistakes
are unavoidable.
8
9


That our perspectives shape
the world around us.
Understand that
SELF-LOVE
is built from
acceptances
and
appreciation.
10
11

To appreciate the
kitten!
things, we have
before they are lost.
12
That everything
has an end,
but
that doesn't mean
it should end
now.
13

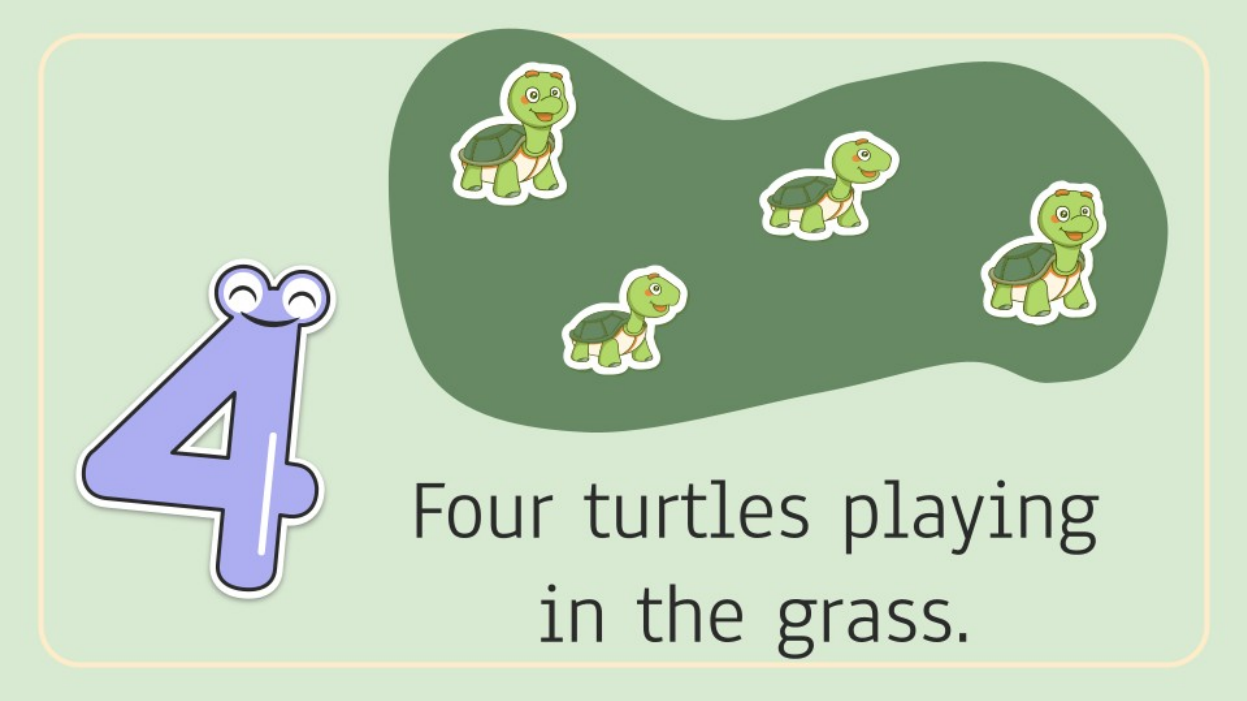
Let's continue to learn
from our experiences.
14


Count With Me!
By: Darby MacDonald

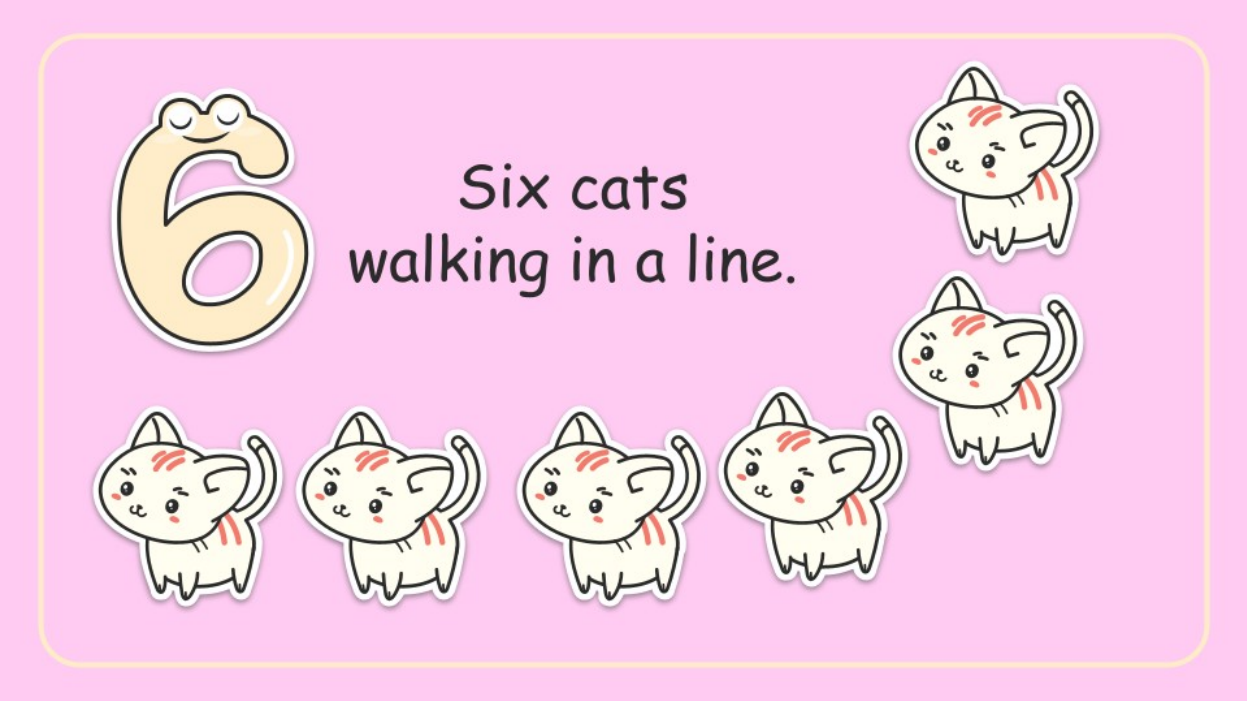
One fish swimming in a tank.

2
Two penguins
playing on ice.

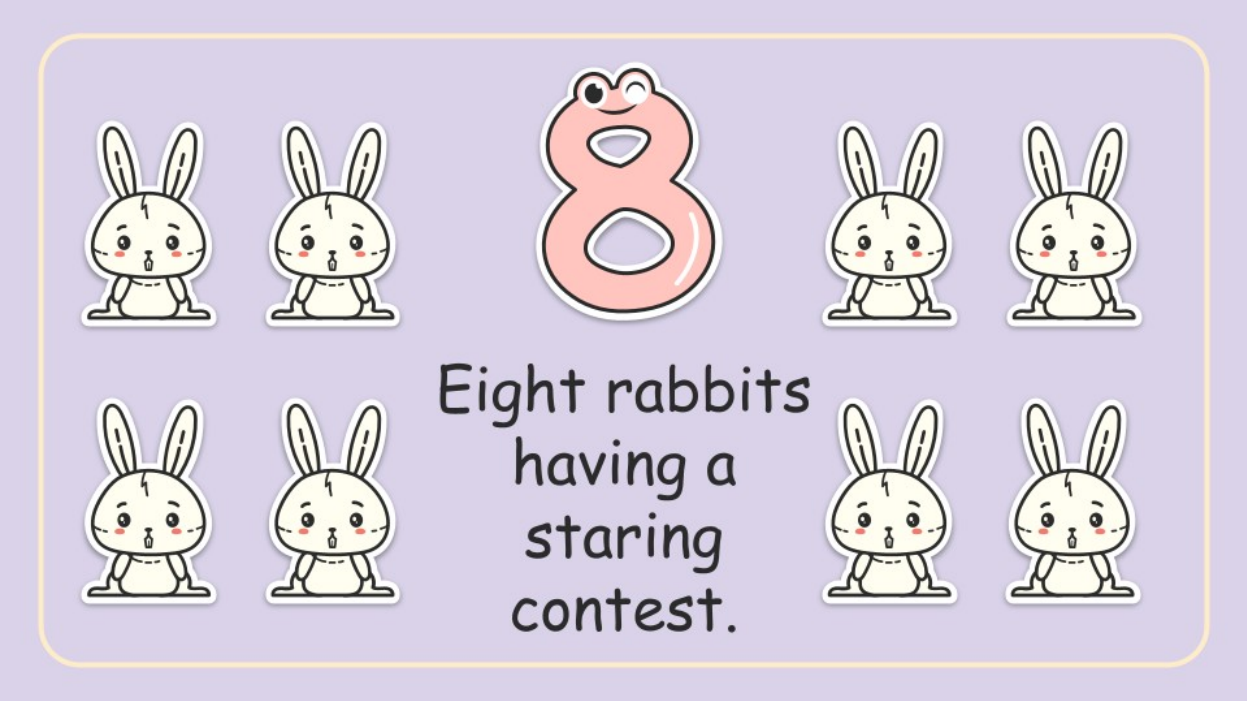
3
Three foxes
playing
hide-in-seek.

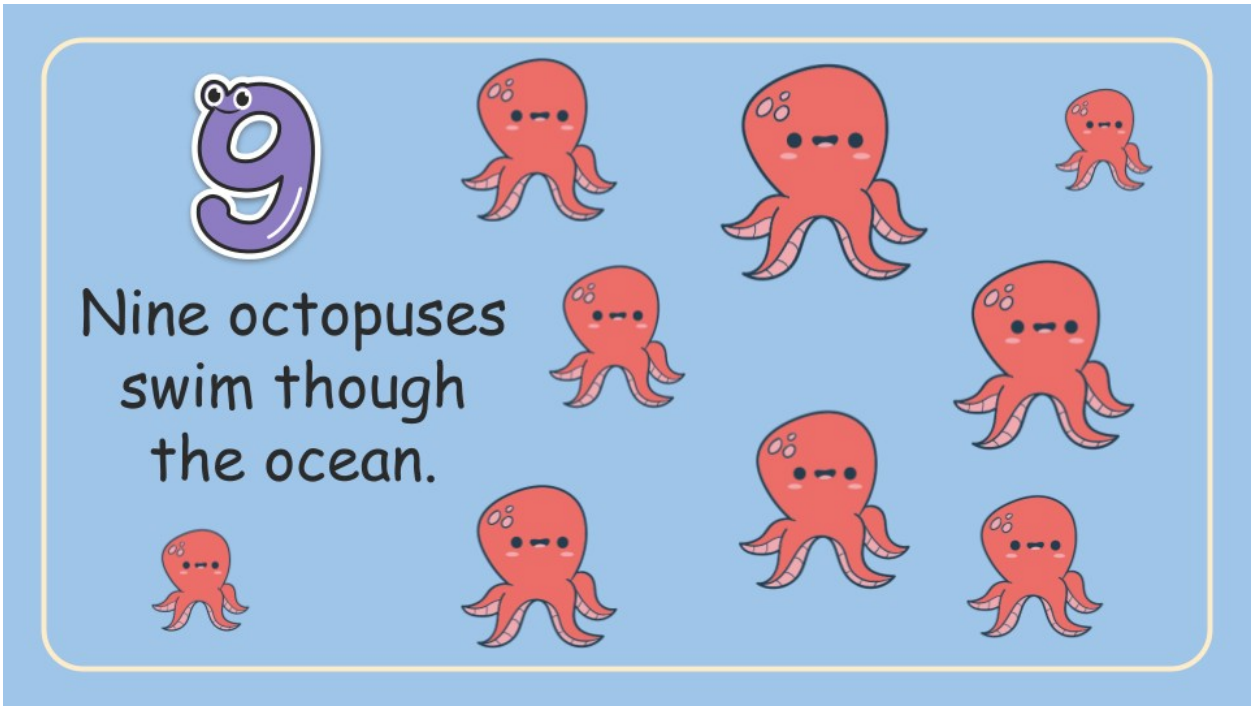

4
Four turtles playing
in the grass.

5
Five pigs
Playing in
the mud


6
Six cats
walking in a line.

7
Seven pandas
taking a nap.


8
Eight rabbits having a staring contest.


9
Nine octopuses swim though the ocean.

08 Riley's Magical Friend.MOV

(placeholder for QR code)

remember to link to this entry in the table of contents once it’s established

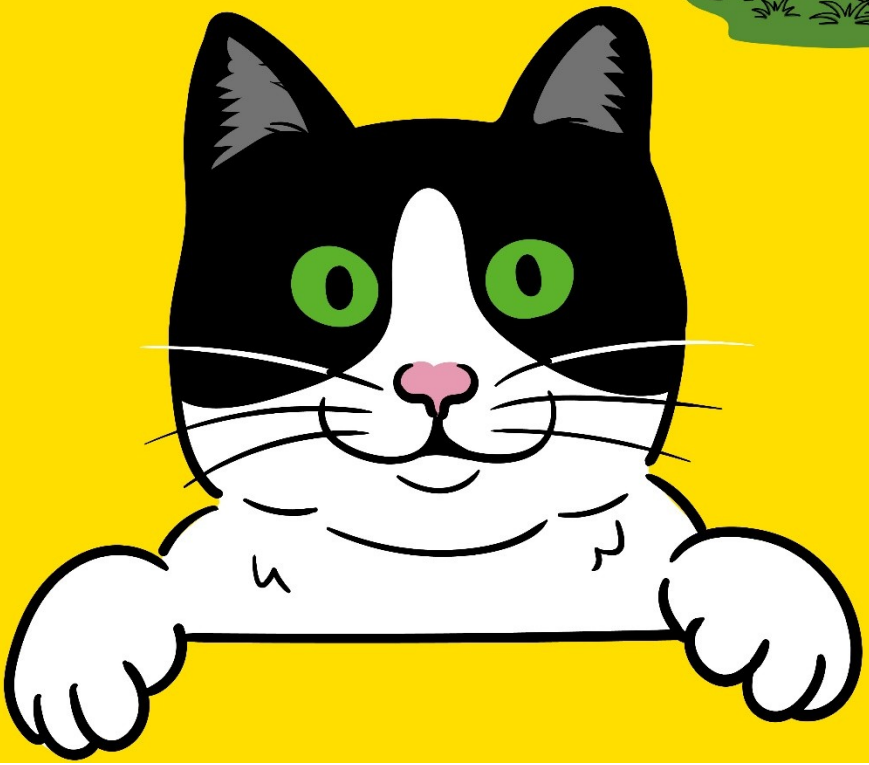
KOW THE CAT

written by
Shyanne Simmons

HI, IM KOW.

NO NOT THE FARM ANIMAL, IM A CAT.

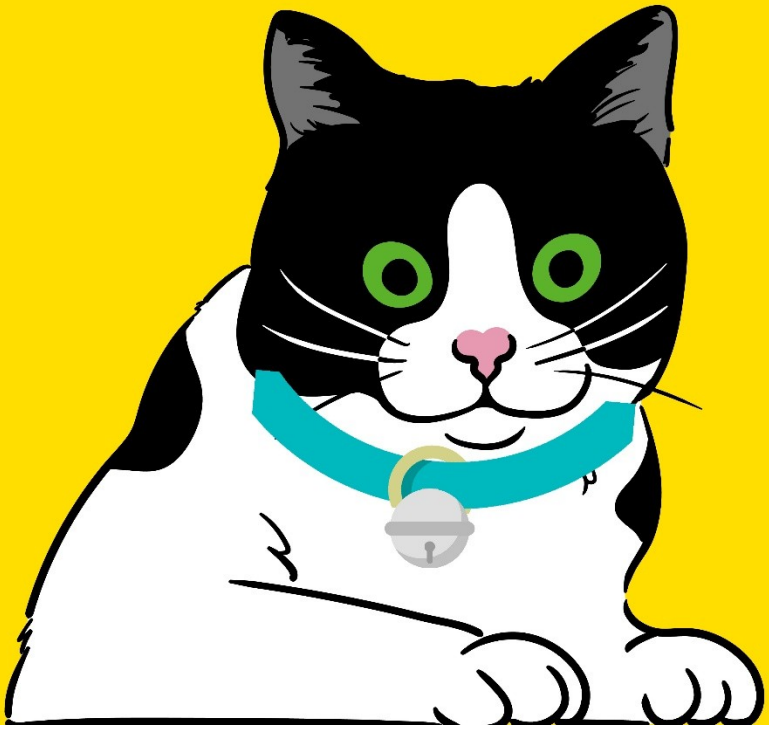
IT'S KOW WITH A K NOT A C.

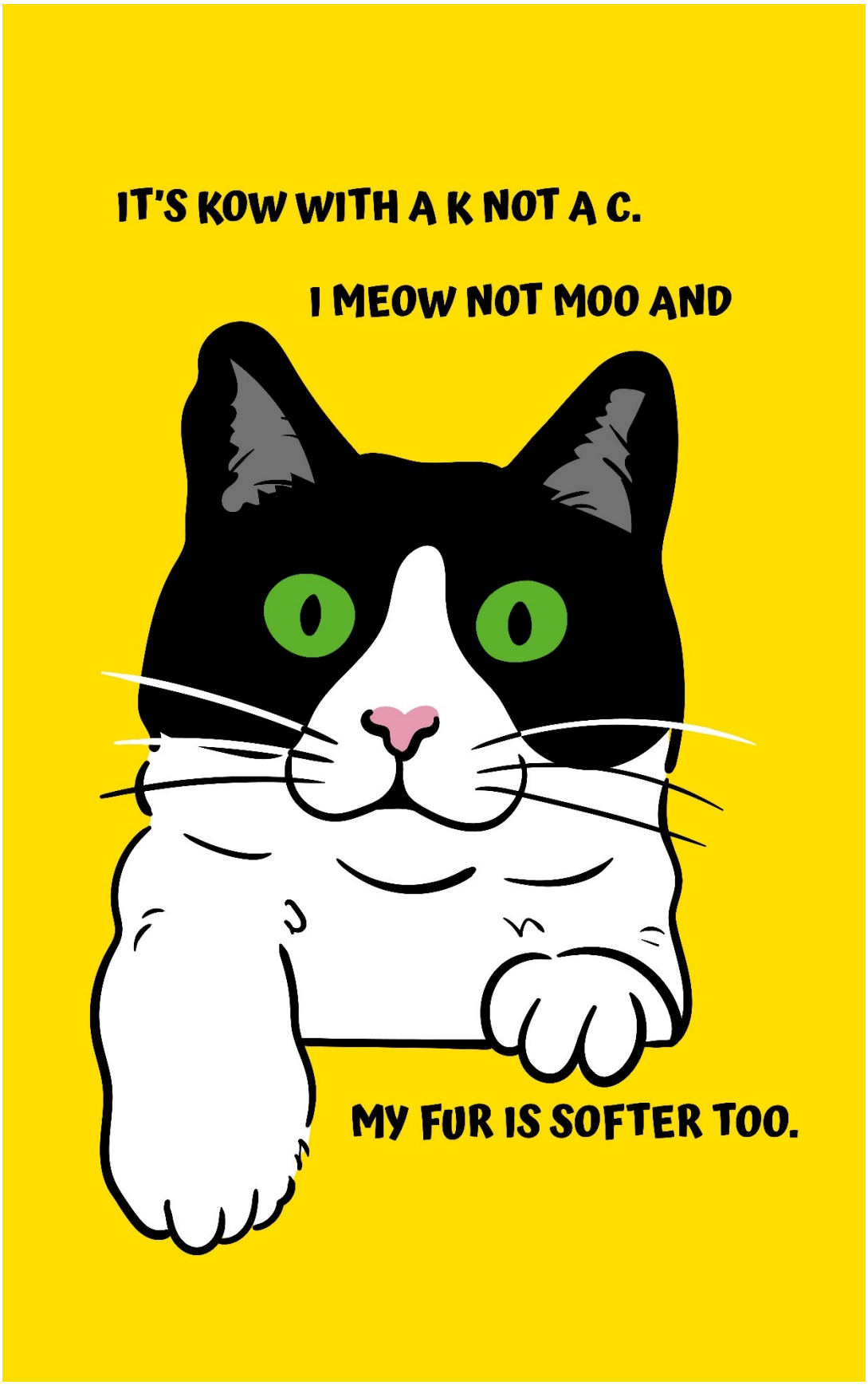


I DONT LIKE TO EAT GRASS OR HAY.

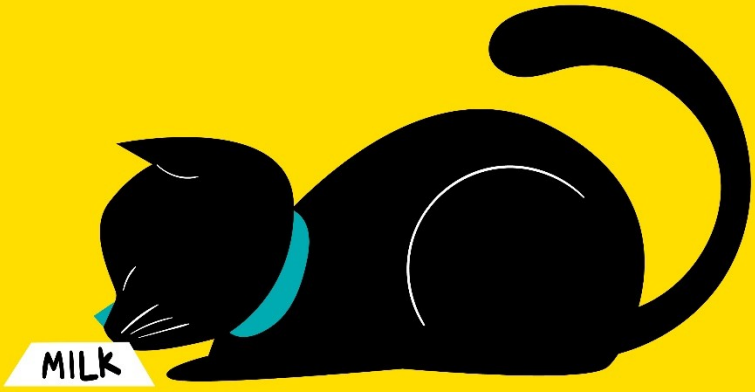
I'D RATHER EAT A TUNA PLATE.

YES, WE BOTH MIGHT WEAR BELLS BUT MINE IS BETTER AND SHINIER.




IT'S KOW WITH A K NOT A C.
I MEOW NOT MOO AND
MY FUR IS SOFTER TOO.

I MIGHT NOT MAKE MILK



BUT I SURE LOVE TO DRINK IT.

AND I DONT THINK A COW CAN

JUMP AS HIGH AS ME !

ITS KOW WITH A K NOT A C.

I DON'T LIKE TO GO OUTSIDE, ID RATHER STAY IN AND PLAY.

AND IN MY BED

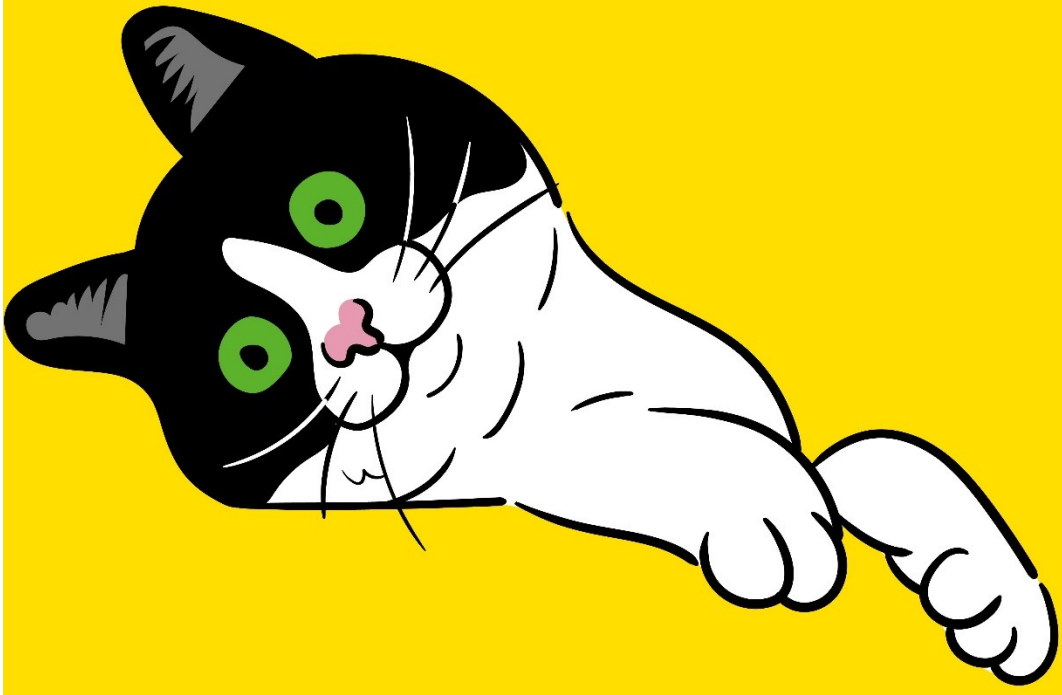
IS MY FAVORITE

PLACE TO LAY.

AND YES I MAYBE
BLACK AND WHITE.

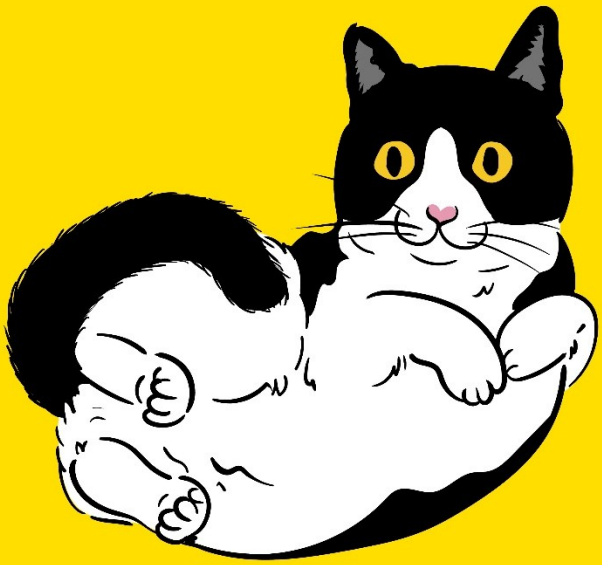
BUT I HOPE YOU REMEMBER.

IT'S KOW WITH A K NOT A C.
IM NOT A COW IM A CAT.



THIS BOOK WAS INSPIRE BY MY REAL CAT, KOW. SHE'S A BLACK AND WHITE TUXEDO CAT THAT I RESUCED FROM THE STREETS. I NAMED HER KOW BECAUSE I LOVE ACTUAL COWS AND SHE WAS BLACK AND WHITE BUT I HAD TO BE DIFFERNT SO I CHANGED THE C TO A K TO MAKE HER UNIQUE. SHE'S ACTUALLY VERY SMALL BUT BOSSY AND LOVES TO EAT. WHEN I TELL PEOPLE HER NAME THEY OBVIOSLY ALWAYS SPELLING HER NAME WRONG OR SAYING "LIKE THE FARM ANIMAL?"

I LOVE YOU KOW.



Identity

“My Art School and Art Business Closing”

My name is Andre Griffin, and I am a Visual Artist entrepreneur. I have had my business for three years and have received many great opportunities, but I have also had some struggles. First, it took coming out of my shell to find this new world. By that, I mainly mean two things. Those two things were switching schools and starting an art business. For you to get the full story, I have to backtrack.

In my ninth-grade year, I attended Northside. After nine years of being there, I realized that this place had caused more bad than good. At that time, I was constantly being mistreated by my fellow peers; there was always drama, and I could never be my true self without judgment. I would constantly pray for a new school where I could be the best version of myself without setbacks. I needed to start somewhere fresh. This was when I found MAC, Midlands Arts Conservatory, where my life as an artist started. I attended MAC in the tenth and eleventh grade. MAC helped me to come out of my shell and allowed me to express myself freely. It was there that I learned so much about all forms of art. The school was filled with life. There was never a day when I could not hear the loud music in dance, the violins being played in music class, or the theater students acting. This was a true art school with teachers who cared and made sure to lift my spirits. Not only did they care for me mentally, but they also put so much effort into making me a better artist. The teachers there gave me many opportunities to expand my skills and even meet artists. One of my most memorable moments there was when the staff at MAC and my mom set up a meeting with me 2 and my favorite artist. I got to meet Ija Charles, a local artist in Columbia. This was how I knew this was my school. My peers wanted nothing but to see me be successful. This is where I met all of my closest friends. MAC was a second home to me. The skills I learned through this school helped me create AG Artistry, LLC.

AG Artistry, LLC is the name of my art business. With this art business, I have had to face obstacles. First, many people did not believe in me or my potential because of the negative stereotypes of being an entrepreneur, especially in the arts field. The second obstacle was figuring out how to run an art business, but thanks to my mom and God’s blessings, I have been able to do great things. For example, sell my first large art piece to a world-renowned poet and have it displayed in her family’s community art center.

All of these moments were truly blessings, and it still shocks me that I was given these opportunities. Skipping forward to my eleventh-grade summer, life for me was at an all-time high. I felt like I was making something great out of my life, and I felt happy that I found my art community. My spirit was soaring in happiness. Although I was happy, there was one question that stayed on my mind, “When will I hit that pothole in the road? The one that causes everything to mess up.” Well, I hit it the first week of June.

It was June 7th, and I was so happy. I was getting prepared to be interviewed by WLTX. The interview went great! I received so much love, attention, and praise for doing so well. I spent the next day relaxing. It wasn't until midnight that I began seeing messages from my friends saying our school was closing due to losing a contract on the new school building that we were supposed to occupy in August. But, so what? I thought. Everyone is just being dramatic. We 3 could just return to the same building. The next day, June 9th to be exact, everyone was freaking out about an email related to the school closing. I remember my mom stopping me in the hall and saying, “The school is permanently closed.” My heart felt like it stopped beating.

I called my friends and immediately began to cry. We felt like we were going to be separated. During that time, my mom texted me asking about what was happening with my business account on Instagram. At that time, I ignored her request. I was still upset about my school closing. Later that day, while riding home with her, she asked about my account again. At the time, my mom had helped me manage my art account and had access to it. She told me she was trying to log in, but for some reason, it kept denying her. This time, I decided to try for myself and see if there is anything suspicious going on. Once I tried to log into my art account, though, it denied me as well. I immediately began to panic and try multiple times, but each time I was met with the same disappointing results. After a while of trying to figure out what happened, I saw something popping up on my stories post. As soon as I saw what was posted, my heart sank, and I knew exactly what had happened. I have been hacked. Out of all things I could have been hacked by, it was Bitcoin. Suddenly, everyone who was aware of this tried to help me. Some of my friends and family did all that they could to see if there was a way to get my account back, but no luck.

Later that night, my mom came to my room to see if I was okay. At first, I managed to keep it together, but later, I broke down. It felt as if my heart shattered into a million pieces, and I was forced to pick it back up. I fell into a deep depression. I truly felt as if I lost who I was.

After a long year and a half of hopelessness, I began to pick myself up. This year, I won the “Best Painting” category in the visual arts competition held here at Midlands Technical College. I graduated valedictorian of my graduating class and started a new art account on Instagram. I became an ambassador here at MTC, and I am currently collaborating with a book company that likes my artwork. Many great opportunities have happened to me recently. Looking back at what happened, I look at it as something that needed to happen. Life comes for us in all sorts of ways, like it came for me. Thanks to family, friends, and most of all, God, I rose above the bad things in life. Now I am here.

Andre Griffin

“My First Pageant”

Imagine a scenario where you join a competition you know nothing about, and you win two titles! This pageant made me look at everything different and that's why it was so impactful for me. Theres so many steps that go into it that help you be more confident as a person. This memory showed me stepping out of your comfort zone makes you experience life better.

Pageants are structured competitions that judge you on several specific skills depending on the type of pageant. They usually have themes that set up the criteria that you are judged on. In this pageant you were judged on the interview portion, theme wear portion, evening wear and our opening number which for us was a dance. The interview portion was a part of the process that you attended before the actual pageant. The judges would meet you in a separate more intimate space where only you and the judges. They ask you random questions that you must be ready for while maintain a calm yet bubbly demeanor trying your best to refrain from using words such as "like and yeah" and trying your best not to stutter or trip over your words. This part of the pageant was 50 percent of your overall score as the others were 30 percent and 20 percent so completing this part successfully was crucial to your chance of winning. This section is also used for you to show your personal insights into what you have done for others around you etc. So, the outfit options are usually business casual/your Sunday best because you are thinking of it as an actual interview because they are going off the resume you submitted. As well as some personal anecdotes. the more interesting you and your story come off to them the better! For example, the judges asked me what my parents did for work and how it has influenced what I want to do career wise going forward. I then explained to them how my father worked for sears home improvement before they shut down this is the company where he met my mother and how I take my mom as a big

remodel because she did roof then continued to do onsite inspections and has always done hard work! I then explained why I found welding so interesting and cherished hard work so much. They loved this response because it is usually out of the ordinary for a woman to do roofing and this are thinking of it as an actual interview because they are going off the resume you submitted. As well as some personal anecdotes. the more interesting you and your story come off to them the better! For example, the judges asked me what my parents did for work and how it has influenced what I want to do career wise going forward. I then explained to them how my father worked for sears home improvement before they shut down this is the company where he met my mother and how I take my mom as a big remodel because she did roof then continued to do onsite inspections and has always done hard work! I then explained why I found welding so interesting and cherished hard work so much. They loved this response because it is usually out of the ordinary for a woman to do roofing and this type of blue-collar work. The more interesting you and your story come off to them the better! The main point is for you and your lifestyle to reflect well on you as a person. They love it when you stand out because individuality is more important to them than just beauty.

The second part of this pageant is the theme wear this is usually different for every pageant depending on the theme. For this pageant the theme was around the world. So, you had to choose a country you would like to represent with your theme wear and say a couple things and facts about your

country and how it connected with your outfit. Every contestant had to represent a different country. It was first come first serve so you submitted it on a google document when it came out and prayed you picked it first or you would end up with a different country. I chose Mexico because I am Mexican and have a lot of knowledge on the country and had several ideas on outfits that represented the country well. I was lucky enough to get the country and I had an idea of using my quinceanera dress for my theme wear! For some quick context quinceaneras are a big celebration in Mexican culture it is for young girls to celebrate their 15th birthday, and the dresses are huge! it's supposed to show you becoming a young woman and entering a new phase in your life, so I got on stage and gave some facts about my dress and facts about quinceaneras. This part is 30 percent of your overall score, and you must memorize what you are going to say on stage and how you deliver your speech for this part is half of your score and the other half is your outfit and how creative you were with it. This was personally my favorite part of the pageant other than the struggle of getting into my dress because it was a corset, this is where having a good stand with the girls in the pageant came in because there was no way I could've tied it myself in such a short amount of time! I personally got close with the girls during the couple practices we had before the pageant and made sure to be helpful with them as much as I could I remember before the pageant helping one of the girls cover her tattoo before stepping on!

The evening wear portion was 20 percent of your score, and this was the final outfit of the pageant. This was an important part to showcase your elegance and your personal style. You had a specific way to walk and while you walked in this part the announcer would read off your resume for the judges and audience. In the resume there were details about you. Such as things you've done for your

community and extracurricular activities. For example, I had some volunteer work that I had done at my church and some of my extracurricular activities like soccer and cheerleading. There was also a section on the resume where you talked about what you were planning to do with your future as in your career choice and what school you were planning on attending.

I put nursing and that I was attending midlands tech. This portion is especially important because it highlights everything about you and how confident you are on stage because you are showing how you carry yourself. This portion really showed me how important it is in a pageant to have yourself put together because the judges are looking for so much more other than just your dress and looks.

Finally, right after evening wear you have scoring, we were scored based on grade level so we walked out in lines. I was really scared because one thing about pageants is you can either win something or nothing and there's a lot of time and effort you put into it. So imagine my surprise when I heard my name for Miss congeniality! It was such a unique award because it's the only award you can get that has nothing to do with the judges. This title was purely based on the other girls in the pageant voting for you. It gave me so much confidence because it was my peers in the pageant genuinely thinking I was a kind and supportive person during the pageant process. It truly showed me how much you as a person

impact others. Winning this changed my view on myself. I was lucky enough to win first runner up for miss senior as well which was decided by the judges.

This pageant changed my perspective on my confidence of who I am as a person. I would never have thought I made such an impact on other people. The whole process and steps of the pageant were so fun, and I am so glad I stepped out of my comfort zone to try something different because it truly made an impact on who I am today. I was able to show my nationality and be proud of all aspects of who I am.

Sara Powell

“Top 12 Facts You Need to Know About Vogue/Ballroom”

1. Ballroom originated in Harlem, New York in the 1960s. This culture was formed by Black and Latino LGBTQ members due to them being treated poorly in drag competitions. In the 1980’s they created voguing (named after the fashion magazine) as a new way to compete.

2. Voguing imitated poses from fashion magazines, martial arts, ballet, gymnastics, and ancient Egyptian art while adding elaborate hand gestures to tell a story through dance.

3. Back in the 1980's when things like the AIDS epidemic and massive hate crimes were being committed toward LGBTQ members, in the ballroom scene they created Houses to keep the community alive and together. A House is considered to be a family for children who don't have families. This was usually due to their biological parents kicking them out for being LGBTQ.

4.

Those who were older in the ballroom scene could become a House mother or father, providing shelter, care, and love to the younger members of the scene. However, to join a house, you would have to compete, and this ties into my next point.

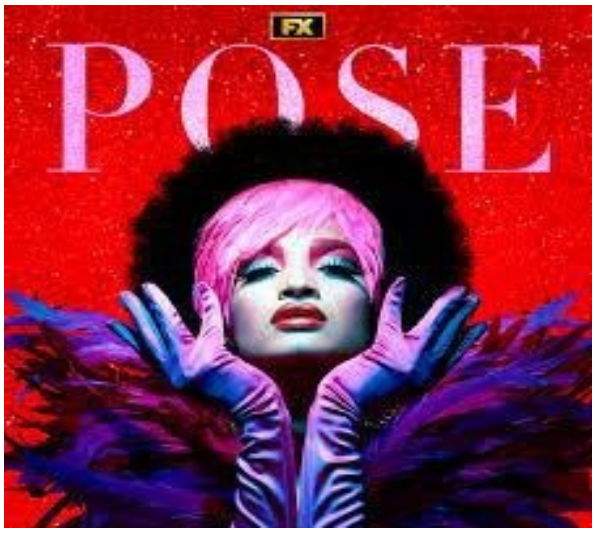
5. Ballroom competition is just like most grand competitions out there, they have categories. Certain categories can be an advantage to certain members of Ballroom houses. These categories could be related to your appearance, flexibility, dance skills, lip-syncing, model experience and so much more.

6. In voguing specifically, there are known to be 5 main elements to voguing. These elements consist of hands, catwalk, duckwalk, spins/dips, and floor. Those who are voguers master these

techniques in order to be the fiercest competitor out there.

7. In 1990, Ballroom started to make its way to the cinema. Director Jennie Livingston created the documentary film, “Paris is Burning”, showing the world what Ballroom Culture is and the beauty and authenticity found within it.

8. Due to the impact of the documentary film, “Paris is Burning”, Ballroom has been able to make its way to the mainstream. Ballroom is now something that is no longer a hidden treasure. Celebrities such as Madonna, Beyonce, Chappell Roan, and Lady Gaga have all taken inspiration and used their platform to uplift the art form. There are also shows such as POSE, RuPaul's Drag Race, and Dragula that are all about the Ballroom and its culture.

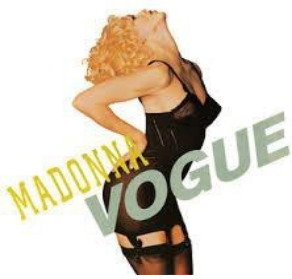


Ballroom culture has made its mark in the fashion industry, causing designers to break gender norms, create bold and extravagant looks, be creative with makeup, and so much more.

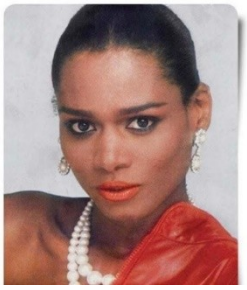
10. Back in 2023, Beyoncé had a huge tour called Renaissance. This tour was a huge celebration of her album, “Renaissance”, where she highlighted ballroom and vogue culture. She reached out to so many influencers, dancers, and amazing people a part of the dance and vogue community to make her own house (not in the traditional sense, though. This was for her tour). By doing this, she gave all of these individuals a chance to boost their platform to the world. The main thing she did, though, was bring light to the world of ballroom and the beauty and passion that is within it.

11. Back in the 1990’s Madonna released one of her greatest songs, known to this day, “Vogue”. In this song, Madonna highlights the Ballroom scene, even incorporating their dance moves and queer/flamboyant manners. This was such a win for the queer community and showed the world that everyone deserves their chance in the spotlight.

12. Ballroom has not just helped people find who they are, but it has also given people a title for themselves. Tracey Afri n American trans woman model d starting off in the Ballroc wn as “The Grandfather of Vogue believed to have started vogue for teaching so m Domonique Jackson ha earlier days in life, she w Allure Ross. This was w today. All these people



13. Even though this last portion is not a topic, I wanted to share how Ballroom has impacted me. I



sadly have never gotten the chance to be in the Ballroom scene, but I have met people who are in it. Ballroom has always been a place where I can look to feel strength and comfort in myself. When finding out about Ballroom, it helped me discover proud LGBTQ history and that people like me are out here and they are out here thriving. In this current state of times, the queer community needs to remember that we are and will continue to be here. Our lives are on those kings and queens who stomped on the ballroom floors.

Andre Griffin

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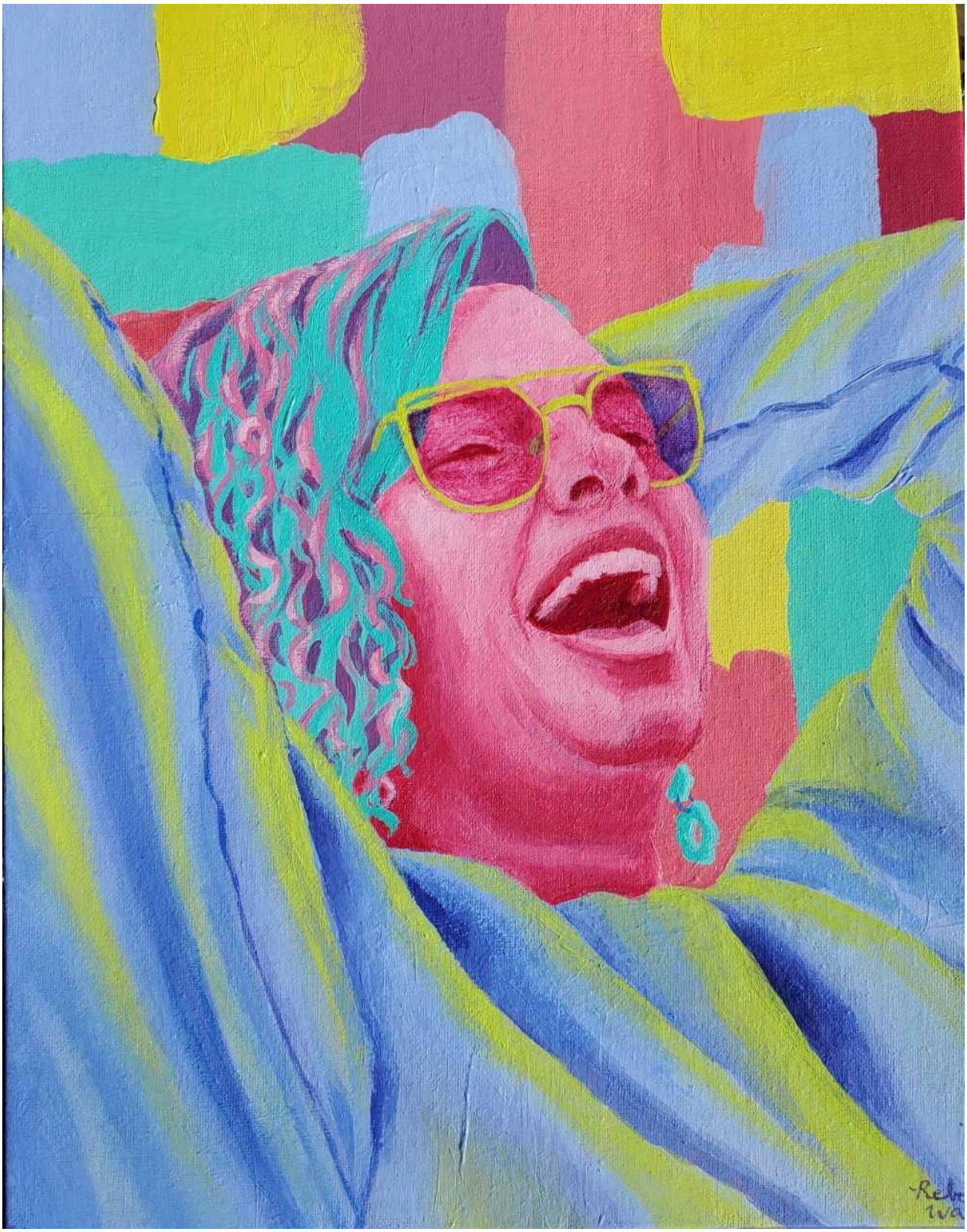

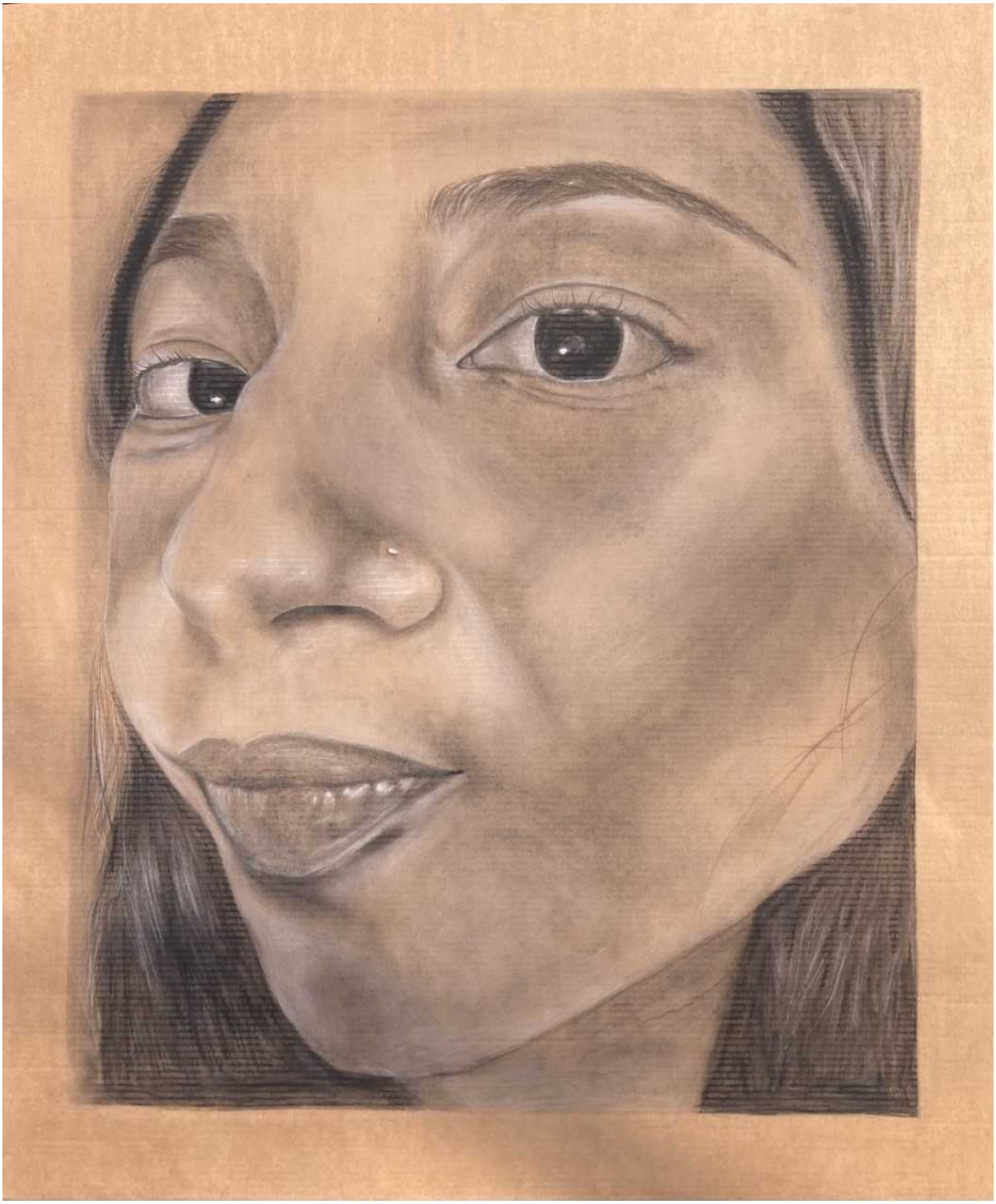

“Top 10 Heisman Candidates for the 2025 College Football Season”

Hello ladies and Gentlemen, my name is Gavin Carnaggio. I am a lover of all thing’s college football. I know the season has just ended, but I’m already looking forward to the season. Today I will be talking about my top 10 Heisman candidates for next year’s season. Before I start my list, I feel like I should explain what the Heisman trophy is. It is the most prestigious award that a college football player could get. It is awarded to the best college football player during that specific year. It is basically the MVP award but this version of it is called the Heisman. Without further ado, here are my top 10 Heisman candidates for next year's college football season, I’m going to go from 10 to 1. Hope you enjoy.

10. Julian Sayin, QB (Ohio State): With the Buckeyes starting quarterback from their championship team graduating, they need someone new to step in to be the next great quarterback at Ohio State. Even just being a redshirt freshman, Julian Sayin could be that. With all the weapons Ohio State is bringing back and bringing in whether it’s through the high school rank or transfer portal, he could be a sneaky player for the Heisman next year.

9. Kevin Jennings, QB (SMU): SMU had one of their best seasons ever last season, making it to the ACC Championship game in their first season in the conference and making the new 12 team college football playoffs. Good news for them is that their starting quarterback is coming back. Kevin Jennings can beat you with his arm and legs, he proved that last year. I could see him being in the Heisman conversation next year.

8. Carson Beck, QB (Miami): Carson Beck was a Heisman favorite to start last season when he was at Georgia. That never happened, he actually struggled last year compared to two years ago when he became a starter. Last year he threw 12 interceptions compared to only throwing 6 the year before and had less yards, and completion percentage than the year before. He has the talent to perform at a Heisman type level and we have also seen QBs under Mario Cristobal perform at a Heisman level. Most noticeably Cam Ward who finished 4th in the Heisman voting last year.

7. Nico Iamaleava, QB (Tennessee): Some people forgot that Nico is only going to be a redshirt sophomore this upcoming season, which meant last season was his first time starting the whole season and doing that as only a redshirt freshman. Because of this, he kind of struggled last year but I think next year will be different. Throwing 5 interceptions during the whole season is very impressive as a first-year starter in the SEC, however he needs to get more touchdowns, he only had 19 last season. He has the talent, and being in Josh Heupel’s offense for a second straight year will also benefit him next season and can maybe help him produce Heisman type number.

6. DJ Lagway, QB (Florida): DJ Lagway is as talented a quarterback as you will find in college football next season. Last year when he stepped on campus, he was a 5-star prospect who was looking

to play early, that didn't happen. Instead, Billy Napier chose to start the veteran Gram Mertz until he tore his ACL in week 7 against Tennessee. DJ Lagway was now the starter, and he shined. He made unbelievable plays and throws that was so crazy to see. Having another year in Billy Napier's offense and being a full year starter could be special for both DJ Lagway and Florida.

5. Arch Manning, QB (Texas): Arch Manning has only started 2 games so far in his career, so how could he be on the preseason Heisman list? He not only has his last name helping him out, but he also has his God given talent helping him to become a Heisman winner. Arch will be surrounded by great talent as well, with Texas holding the number one recruiting class according to 247 sports. Not to mention Arch will have one of the best offensive minds in the sport in Steve Sarkisian. Arch Manning's expectations are extremely high, but if he can reach them, watch out rest of college football.

4. Jermiah Smith, WR (Ohio State): Jermiah Smith had a freshman season for the history books last year. He finished the season with 76 receptions an Ohio State true freshman record, 1,315 receiving yards, and recorded 15 touchdowns. He also added a National Championship, what a freshman campaign! It's extremely rare that a wide receiver is on the Heisman preseason list. It's also rare for them to actually win, with the last going to DeVonta Smith after the 20-21 season. It's going to be for him to win it, but he definitely has the talent to win the prestigious award as a wide receiver.

3. LaNorris Sellers, QB (South Carolina):

LaNorris Sellers started the season slowly last season. This was not surprising since he was only a redshirt freshman and a first year starting quarterback in the SEC. However, after week 7 he was incredible and unstoppable. He was dotting defenses up and then when they thought they had stopped him from throwing the ball he would just run right by him. If he can stay healthy next season, he definitely could be in New York for the Heisman Trophy.

2. Garret Nussmeier, QB (LSU): Many people last season thought that Garret Nussmeier could be a sneaky Heisman contender. He showed flashes of being one but also flashes of not being close to one at all. So Brain Kelly decided to get him some help by signing the number 1 ranked transfer portal class according to 247 sports. This includes getting two of the best wide receivers in Nic Anderson (Oklahoma)

and Barion Brown (Kentucky). Garrett also has important pass catching players coming back that was on this season previously.

1. Cade Klubnik, QB (Clemson): Cade Klubnik was thought to be the next great quarter back at Clemson and got so much hype. His first year starting he didn't live up to the hype and struggled, but he bounced back last season in a big way. He threw 36 touchdowns and only 6 picks the whole season and also added some rushing touchdowns as well. He's coming back next season with the most passing touchdowns from last season going into this coming up season. He has his top 3 wide receiver weapons coming back next year too. Two freshman all-Americans and rising sophomores TJ Moore and Bryant Wesco, and a first team All ACC receiver in Antonio Williams coming back as well. Klubnik's Heisman campaign starts with a home game vs Heisman hopeful Garret Nussmeier and the LSU Tigers on August 30th.

Gavin Carnaggio

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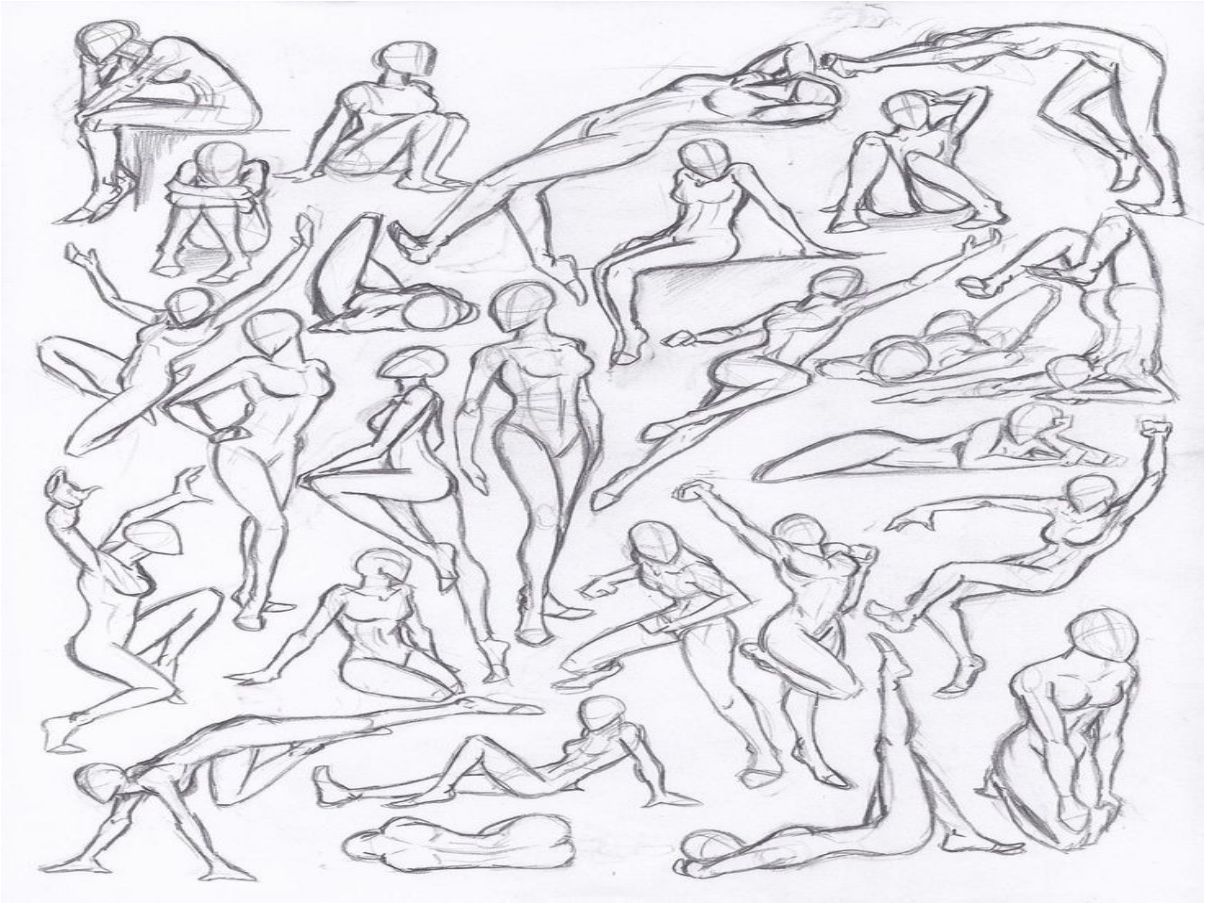
“Top 10 Tips for Aspiring Cartoonists”

Host: “Welcome to Creative Sketches, the podcasts for cartoonists looking to elevate their craft! I’m your host, Joi Smith, and today we’re diving into the top 10 tips for aspiring cartoonists. Whether you draw for fun, are working on a webcomic, or dream of publishing your own graphic novel, these tips will help you sharpen your skills and boost your confidence. So grab your sketchbook or just sit back and listen and let’s get started!

Tip 1: Develop Your Unique Style: “Your style is your visual signature—- the thing that sets you apart from the crowd. Here’s a simple exercise: draw the same character five times, but change something about the style each time. Make the eyes bigger, exaggerate the proportions, or experiment with line thickness. This helps you explore and discover what feels most natural to you.”

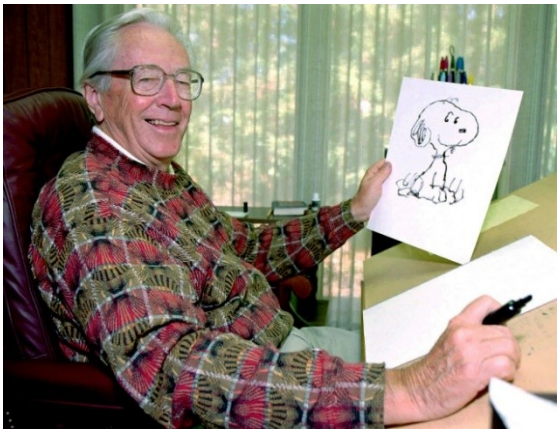
Talking Points: “If you’re just starting, don’t stress about finding your style right away. It’s something that evolves over time”. One way to develop your style is to experiment. Try mimicking different cartoonists you admire, not to copy techniques. Eventually you’ll start blending those influences into something that feels authentically yours. To challenge yourself, draw the same character in five completely different styles, then see which elements you naturally gravitate toward”.

Tip 2: Master the Basics of Drawing and Anatomy: "Even though cartoons are often simplified, they rely on a strong foundation in drawing and anatomy. Try this challenge: sketch a character in three different poses—- standing, sitting, and jumping. Start with stick figures to map the motion, then build your character around the structure."



Talking Points: "Understanding anatomy helps you create characters that move naturally and express emotions effectively, you don't need to be a hyperrealistic artist but studying basic proportions and poses will make your cartoons more believable. Gesture drawing is a fantastic way to practice, set a timer for 30 seconds and sketch quick poses. It helps loosen up your lines."

Tip 3: Study Great Cartoonists: “Every great artist learns from those who came before them. Studying great cartoonists can give you insight into storytelling, humor, and character design”. One of the best ways to grow as a cartoonist is to study the greats. Whether it’s Charles Schulz, who created the most famous cartoon characters “Charlie Brown and Snoopy” from The Peanuts, Stephen Hillenburg, who created Nickelodeon's highest-rated TV show, “Spongebob Squarepants”, or Rebecca Sugar, who created Cartoon Network series “Steven Universe”, or even Craig McCraken, who created several of TV series like “The Powerpuff Girls, and Foster’s Home for Imaginary Friends” , look closely at how they tell stories and design characters.



Talking Points: “Examine both classic and modern cartoonists—-even creators on platforms like Webtoon. Pay attention to how they use linework to convey emotion and how they pace their stories. And don’t just admire their final work—study their sketches and drafts to understand their creative process.”

Tip 4: Practice Storytelling: “Cartoons aren’t just about cool drawings, they’re about telling compelling stories, whether in a single panel or a full comic series.” Try this: Draw a simple 4 panel comic

strip with no words. Focus only on using expressions and body language to tell the story. This exercise will sharpen your ability to communicate visually.

Talking Points: "Even short strips need a beginning, middle, and end. Focus on creating characters with clear motivations. If you're stuck, start with a simple prompt like: What if a dog had to babysit a mischievous kitten?"

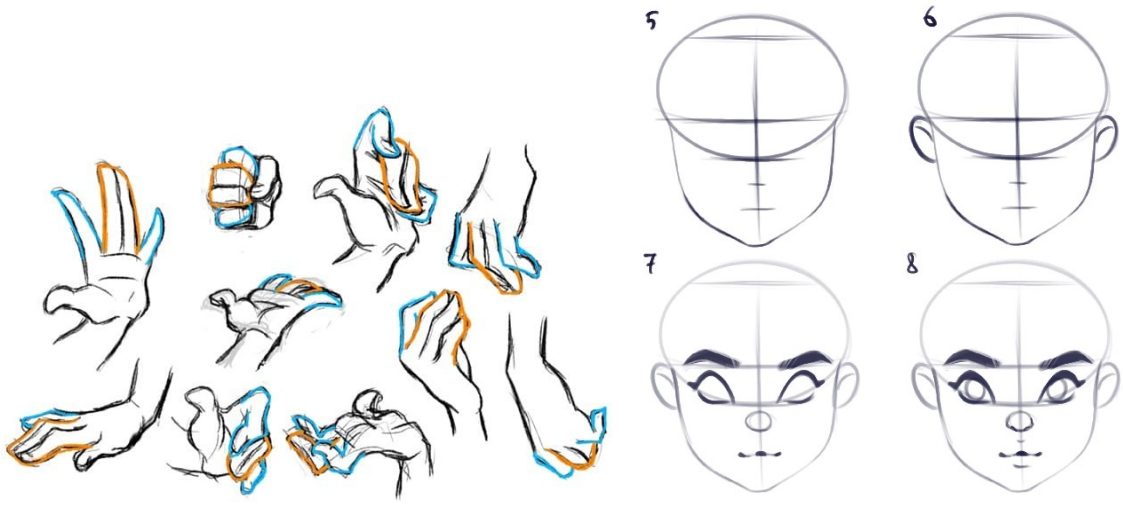
Tip 5: Keep it Simple: "Simplicity is definitely key. Don't over complicate your drawing or your message." Create a before-and-after graphic: On the left, draw a complex, over-detailed cartoon. On the right, simplify the same cartoon to its essential elements. You'll see how clarify makes a big difference."

Talking Points: "Strong Ideas shine through clean, thoughtful visuals. Think about iconic cartoon characters—-most have simple, memorable designs. Challenge yourself: draw a scene using only three lines and see if the idea still comes through."

Tip 6: Learn Digital Tools and Software: "Digital tools are essential in today's cartooning world. Practice creating the same illustration through three stages: rough sketch, clean ink lines, and final color. Label each stage to understand the digital workflow."

Talking Points: "Popular software includes Procreate, Adobe Illustrator, and Clip Studio Paint, but don't get overwhelmed by all the features, focus on mastering a few key tools at a time. If you're more comfortable with traditional media, many programs mimic real brushes and textures, so you can transition smoothly."

Tip 7: Develop a Routine and Stay Consistent: “Consistency builds skills and audience. Create a calendar with small daily challenges like: “sketch a face,” “draw a comic panel,” or “practice hand poses.” Having a routine keeps you motivated.”



Talking Points: “Set your schedule that works for you, whether it's 30 minutes a day or a few hours on the weekends. Track your progress by keeping a sketchbook and reviewing it every month to see how far you’ve come. But make sure you remember, having an art block is real, but discipline helps you push through it.”

Tip 8: Seek Feedback and Collaborate: “Art doesn’t exist in a vacuum. Seeking feedback and collaborating with other artists can help you grow.” Create a graphic flowchart: Start with your initial sketch, then show how it evolves based on feedback from peers or collaborators.”

Talking Points: “Joining online communities or attending local workshops to connect with other cartoonists. Always remember constructive criticism is gold, it helps you see things from a fresh perspective. But don’t be afraid to collaborate on projects, it’s a great way to learn and push your boundaries.”

Tip 9: Build Your Online Presence: "Sharing your work online is one of the best ways to reach a wider audience. Create a sample social media post featuring a clean image, a catchy caption, and relevant hashtags."

Talking Points: "Platforms like Instagram, Webtoon, and Twitter are great for showcasing your art. Consistency and audience engagement are key. Don't hesitate to share behind-the-scenes content like sketches or time-lapse videos—-and remember, hashtags and collaborations expand your reach.

Tip 10: Don't Fear Failure: "Last but not least, don't be afraid to fail. Experimentation and occasional failures are a part of the creative journey." Create a Growth Journey timeline graphic:

Start with rough, messy sketches and show gradual improvement over time. It's a powerful reminder that progress is built on persistence."

Talking Points: "Every successful cartoonist has a pile of sketches that didn't work out, but those failures often lead to breakthroughs. Keep pushing yourself and remember that growth comes from stepping out of your comfort zone. If something doesn't work, learn from it and move on.

Host: "And that wraps up our "Top 10 Tips for Aspiring Cartoonists!" I hope you found these insights helpful and inspiring. If you enjoyed this episode, don't forget to subscribe, share it with your fellow artists, and leave a review. I'd love to hear your thoughts and any tips that have helped you along your creative journey. Thanks for tuning in to Creative Sketches—-until next time, keep sketching, keep smiling, and keep creating"!

Joi Smith

MAURICE SENDAK

AUTHOR, ILLUSTRATOR

> ***Wild Things*** **really is the anxiety and pleasure and immense problem of being a child.**
>
> -SENDAK

IMPACT ON CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Sendak made childrens books more mentally realistic, he explored the deep (good and bad) capacities of chioldrens emotions in a way that is more relatable for kids, rather that may be messy or frightening for us adults, Sendak aimed to display a child's inner word in his art.

ABOUT SENDAK

Born in Brooklyn, New York, June 10th 1928 and died May 8th 2012 accomplishing the 1964 Caldecott medal (plus seven Caldecott Honors) Hans Christian Medal (1970), National Book Award, National Medal of Arts, Astrid Lindgren Award (2003), and more.

WHY I CHOSE SENDAK

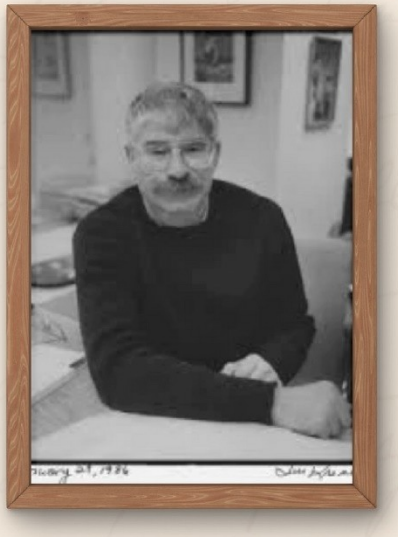
I chose to do this infographic about Sendak because in my eyes he chnaged the game in childrens lit. though some of his work may be contriveral to others. Some of the themes in his work like sexuality, child anxiety, and rebellion are too dark for many people, but i find it facinating how he explored these topics in his work in a creative impactful way.

EXPERIENCE

Sendak is most known for his book "Where The Wild Things Are, what many dont know is that he also widely known for changing the game in children literature, from the classic story tales and nursery rhymes, to his thought-provotiking and artistic work now.

Hailey Twiggs

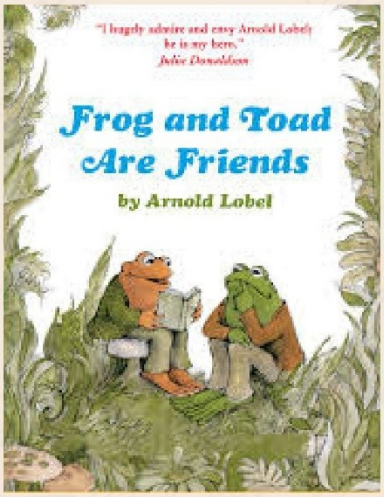
LIFE OF ARNOLD



Arnold Lobel:

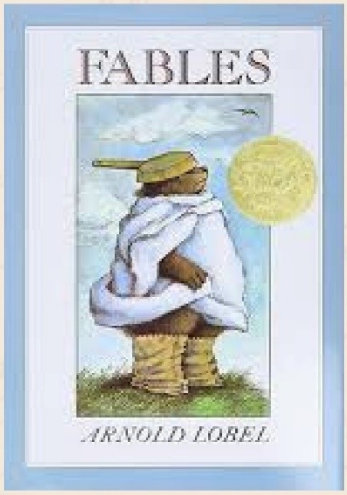
- Born in 1933 in Los Angeles, raised in New York
- Passed in 1987
- Author and illustrator
- Illustrated even as a young boy

Quote: "All the miles of a hard road are worth a moment of true happiness"



Works:

- *Frog and Toad* series(which I know him from) is one of his most popular creations
- Illustrated nearly 100 children's books
- Medium: graphite, ink, and watercolor
- Often depicts animal characters acting like humans



Awards:

- Caldecott Medal picture book Fables (1981)
- Caldecott Honor Books-his own *Frog and Toad are Friends* (1971) and *Hildilid's Night* by Cheli Duran Ryan (1972)
- Newbery Honor chapter book *Frog and Toad Together* (1973)

I chose Arnold Lobel because his *Frog and Toad Are Friends* series was a big part of my childhood. Also his illustrations keep me staring at them analyzing every corner.

Sources: carlemuseum.org , goodreads , readingrockets.org

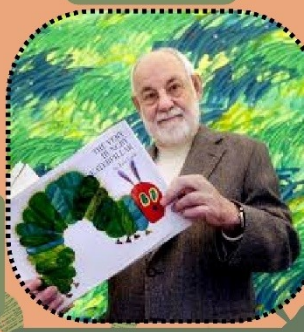
"The Very Hungry Caterpillar"

Source: https://eric-carle.com/

Eric Carle: An Inspiration for all ages

Eric Carle, though passed in 2021, continues to impact the genre of Children's Literature through his creative illustrations and lighthearted work.

Eric Carle



June 25, 1929 - May 23, 2021

Carle was born in New York and promptly moved to Germany at the age of six. With a dream to return to the United States, he came back at age 23.

Awards and Impact on CL

"The Very Hungry Caterpillar" has received 9 awards since it's publishing, including the New York Times Top Ten CI in 1969. Carle himself has been awarded numerous times for his work.

Directory from the Home of Eric Carle's website

"Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What do you See?" was written by author Bill Martin Jr. who asked Carle to illustrate for the work after seeing an advertisment by him. This kickstarted Carle's career.

"A Very Hungry Caterpillar" had a major impact on Gen Z audiences, the books publishing aligning with the children's reading age for (now) older generations.

Notable Works by Carle

"The Very Hungry Catterpillar"

"Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?"

"The Tiny Seed"

Carle's main impact comes from his distinctive and recognizable illustrative work, which has personally stuck with me through my childhood and into adulthood!

Here is a link to the book animated and narrated!

The Very Hungry Caterpillar - Animated

ACT 2

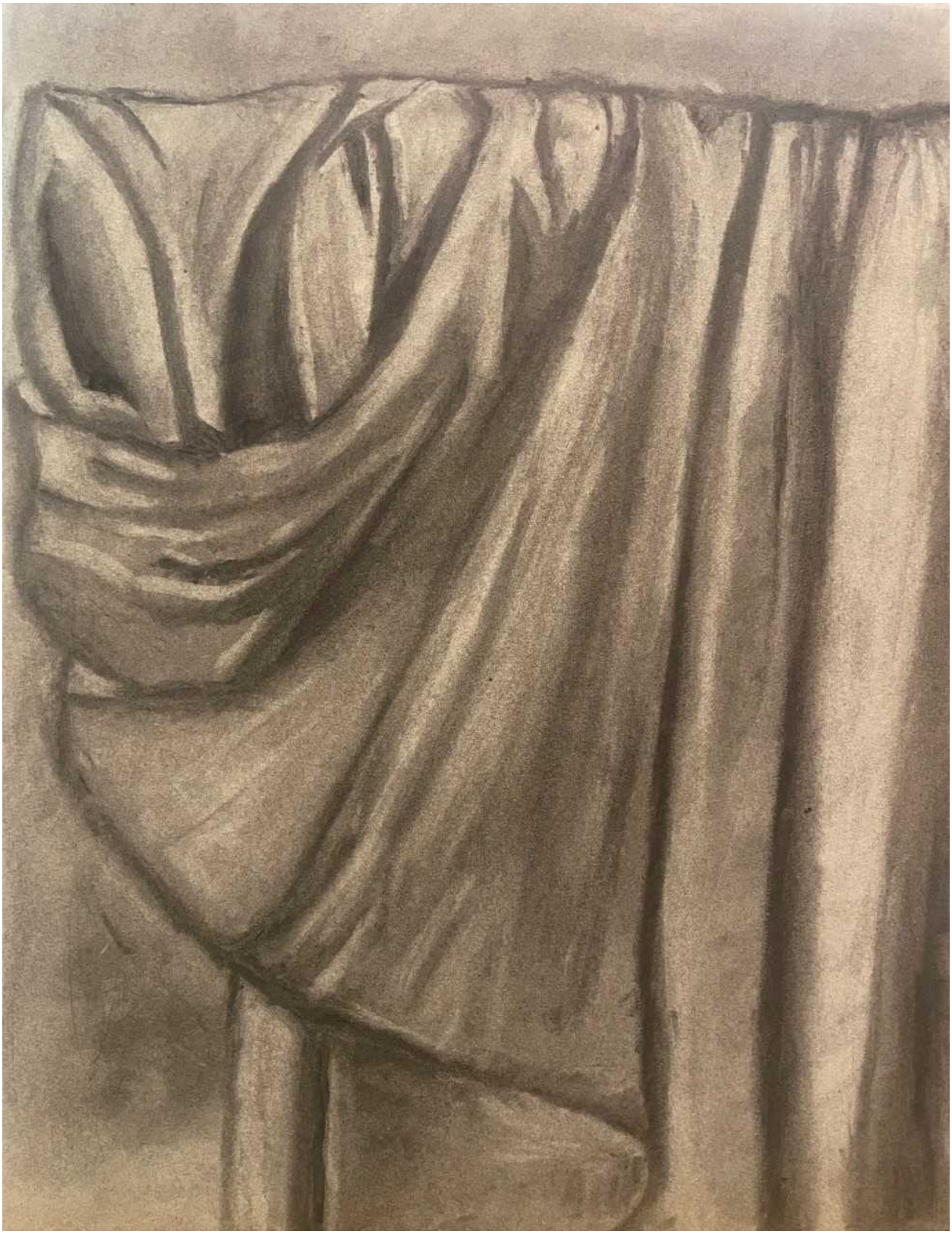
reckoning with “nature”
with “self”

turning points

how do we create meaning?
how are meanings challenged?

loss
of love?
of comfort?
or memory?

Connections



“Her Amber Hue”

When I look at you, I see an amber hue
Like the dawn that breaks my quiet night
And my eyes linger, lost in the view.

The kind that kisses the morning dew
From tangled sheets and boxfan breeze
When I look at you, I see an amber hue

Her light paints the skies in golden blue
As we emerge from the dim theatre
And my eyes linger, lost in the view.

You grin as we wait in game queue
All snark and laughs, I know I’ll lose
When I look at you, I see an amber hue

And all the silly pictures you drew
I press the dust of yesterday into my palms
And my eyes linger, lost in the view

I’m selfish, that much is true
I pocket the sighs of summers to warm my empty hands.
When I look at you, I see an amber hue
And my eyes linger, lost in the view.

Zoe Faucette

“Unfinished Floors and Coffee Stains”

My lashes are heavy from sleep and crust,
I stumble onto the kitchen floor sawdust,
I tiptoe around the hole in our floor,
I pick up the trash from under the drawer,
The smell of sweet must hits my nose,
The oil and sweat linger on my clothes,

I rinse out old coffee from the pot,
And I think about how we usually fought,
I start the brew, and I grab a mug,
I pull my arms around me, bitter and snug,
The house whispers to me, it agrees,
The hands we were dealt were rotten with disease.

Zoe Faucette

“His Love Responds to the Passionate Shepherd”

Sweet are the words you sing to me
Of amber studs and hills of green
But pray tell, my Dearest, how exactly
Do you plan on making these dreams a reality?

A shepherd’s work is anything but idle
As you tend to your sheep in dirt and puddles
Who, darling, is left to care for your love?
Do you believe me your pet, like a dove?

A gilded cage is still a cage, regardless if it glimmers
I’m sure betwixt my bars I’ll see the grand, rushing rivers
No matter the bills, or a home, or food for dinner
We’ll have a thousand fragrant posies! That’s a real winner

I can see you dislike my candid reply
But truly, dearest, what should say I?
You mistake my critique for a complete rejection
Rather than me thinking of asset protection

Darling, you think of such romantic things
But beds of roses provide comfort only in fantasy
A life in paradise, the ultimate dream come true
My dear, think critically, but we have too much to lose.

I would love nothing more than to escape with you
And see the valleys, groves, and mountains that prove
A pleasurable life, with you by my side
Observing nature’s gifts, decadently living life

Don’t get me wrong, it sounds quite lovely
I don’t wish to turn out your dream so roughly
If things were to change, I daresay
I may be willing to see things your way

But Dearest, my Darling, my doe-eyed love
You forget we are poor! We have no means to move!
You are a shepherd, and your paycheck is lacking
The funds we need to get to packing!

Anna Goodwin

“My Friend Death, Chapter 1: Death”

My feet land on the soft, muddy bank of a large body of water. I groan, not enjoying the feel of it and knowing my cloak will be damp for hours while working. There’s no point in constantly draining my magic to dry myself until I’m all done with my work in this location, so I sigh and suck it up.

“Typical start to just another wonderful day in paradise” I say rolling my eyes.

I brush down a ruffle in my cloak, and look up from my body to take in my surroundings. Searching for any clue to figure out what happened that could be so intense that my being was almost pulled to this location without use of my magic.

A large fire meets my gaze. Orange and red flares dancing as one as it devours the mound beneath. Thick black clouds rise from the rubble and surround me in a dense fog, masking my vision. The smell of fuel and acrid smoke invade my senses. I wave my hand as if it will waft away smoky air and enable me to see better, but it doesn’t. There are several other smaller fires that I can make out, surrounding the biggest one in front of me, consuming all that lay in its path.

I squint my eyes through the haze and peer through the flames. Cries of pain and wails of despair fill the air. To any reaper, it would be music to our ears. But to me, it is no music. Its more work and dealings than I’d like to be bothered with.

Immediately next to me is a pile of twisted metal debris. I study it for a second, taking in the now dented and mangled surface and bolts along the middle. A piece sticks up from it, a perfectly designed flap displaying innerworkings of cables underneath. It’s part of a wing of a plane, the outer tip of it in fact. Its hull broken into three separate pieces. One lays upside down at the edge of the water, just a stone’s throw away from the other two. Debris coats the shoreline, and unfortunately, so do a number of the bodies from inside the plane

The plane was massive, one of the bigger ones that can carry up to four hundred passengers, and this one was packed to the brim with people. It made sense as to why the pull here was strong, so many souls are calling for their release into the afterlife.

A male’s body lay splayed out on their belly just steps away from me. I march over to start the reaping, taking note that it’s their time. The glow of life is gone from around them. I gently tap the end of my scythe to their head, creating the smallest cut to release their soul into the hazy air around us.

Their essence swirls in a magical display in front of me, giving me a few glimpses of their life. I see him as a young boy, protecting someone from a bully. Another scene whirls by and he’s older, high school age, helping a disabled friend and standing up for them. Next, he at college graduating with a

degree in special education. And finally, the last vision I see is him on his wedding day smiling wide with his beautiful wife. He is a helper, a defender. And from what I can tell, his soul is pure.

He appears in front of me as nothing more than a dull, sepia tone apparition, wearing the same clothes he died in. As most do when their souls depart from their body, he studies his hand. Curiously peering through it like he's gazing out a window.

"I'm dead, aren't I?" He questions, not looking at me, still studying his ghastly appearance. His voice cracking with sadness, as face turns downward. "I knew we weren't going to make it."

"I'm sorry." I say, placing my hand on his shoulder, giving him a little compassion. I get coming to this side is hard, especially in this circumstance. No matter how bad of a mood I am in, or how much I despise this job, I do try to give these people some sense of understanding.

"Do you know what happened?" I asked. I knew the plane obviously crashed, but I still contained that curiosity that every human has, the need to know and understand. I felt it separated me from the rest of the reapers as they never want to know the details, and most hardly ever comfort the souls in the afterlife. It's like they've lost all their humanity once they become one of us.

He slowly nods, exhaling deeply, "We had just taken off, climbing up into the sky. The plan sputtered and a loud noise came from the side. The engine blew." His voice shakes, tears welp in the corner of his eyes, "The pilot came over the intercom and told us he was doing everything he could to get us to the waters of Lake Michigan, to try to cushion the impact some and save us. But clearly our momentum fell short."

A door of light appears next to me, calling to the man taking him by surprise. "It's time to go. I am so sorry for what you went through, truly I am." I gesture for him to move forward.

He stares at the open door, blinding light flaring out from within. He is mesmerized, in a trance. He takes one step closer and pauses, looking back at me with begging eyes. "Can you find my wife? Can we walk through together?"

I can't tell him no, although I am becoming irritated. The dead never make requests of the reapers and if they do, we never give in. I clench my teeth; his request is causing me to resist the call of so many deaths and its threatening to split me in different directions. I motion for him to follow me anyway, giving in to that compassion that I still hold. "I can't guarantee we find her before the door pulls you through, but we can try." He smiles and puts his hands together and nods in gratitude.

The smoke thickens as we walk towards the center of the wreckage. My grim thoughts grow heavier. I swallow thickly because how can someone not get emotional seeing this? I know I'm dead, just a reincarnation of a person whose whole existence is to retrieve the souls for their next life, but this? So many lives tragically stolen, their stories left unfinished, abruptly cut short in an unfinished chapter. It's the

never knowing the ending that always gets me. The part that is left unwritten since the author is never able to pick up the pen and continue with the storyline. I'd give anything to be able to pick my pen back up and jump back into my life.

I stroked the outline of the box in my trouser pocket beneath my robe. It was the only thing I retrieved from my former life after I became what I am today. And right now, that little box felt like it was on fire as I watched the man search for his wife. It was the one artifact that could have changed my human life forever. The one thing that could have given me everything I had ever wanted with just the simple response of "Yes".

"There she is!" The man gasps as he sprints forward to kneel beside her. She's barely breathing, the faint hue around her slowly fading. Her breaths are shallow and ragged, close to the end. "I'm here baby. We can go together into the light." Her eyes flash with some sort of recognition as if she hears him, which her soul probably does being this close to death.

A delicate smile forms at her lips as I perform my ritual again and her slightly brighter form whirls from her body, showing me visuals of her helping her disabled sister in a wheelchair in an amusement park as a teen, to her volunteering at an event to raise money for paralysis victims to get them wheelchairs. The day she started her non-profit with her sister and their ribbon cutting at the door of their new location. She seemed to be the perfect match for her husband and her soul was just as pure as his.

Once her form fully appeared, she immediately embraced her husband. I frown, though they can't see my face beneath my hood, knowing that I will never be able to experience the love they share, causing me to clutch that little box tighter.

"Thank you." The man tells me with one of the most genuine smiles I have ever received, as he and his wife stride arm in arm into the light. The door vanishes instantly as they go through.

I stare at the empty space for a moment wondering for what seems like the millionth time what it would be like to go through one of those doors. And thinking of how different my life would be if I could have gone there, instead of being me, being here.

I groan, no longer being able to postpone the death song lulling me to the others. Its eerie, slow, music box chime growing louder and louder as the need becomes more pressing. I set my sights to closest call, the center part of the plane pulling at me harder than any other area here.

It's hard to look at as I strode inside. So many people lost their lives in this one event, blood and luggage litter the aisle as well as broken bits of the ceiling of the plane. Air bags are strapped to a few passengers' limp bodies, but some flap in the breeze flowing through the compartment. I wouldn't be able to stomach this scene being mortal, and I wonder how the emergency response team will handle it. There's no way they wouldn't be taking these visuals home with them.

I make my way down the rows, releasing the souls as I go. I've never had so many life forces around me at once and the need to try to comfort them is strong. At least they have each other to lean on as I work. I speak to a few, keeping them all under control until I can direct them onto the next path. It works for the most part and everyone departs this realm with little to no chaos.

Back in the final row is my last reaping, and he is a beast of a man. His dark hair is shaved along the sides and disheveled on the top, obviously from the landing. I see the tips of a tattoo peeking out from underneath his collar. I can't see his face; his head is pressed against the seat in front of him. One hand hangs down into the aisle and I see it is also covered in more bands of ink, letters across his fingers. "Well, it looks like it's your turn, Hulk." I tell him as if he can hear me.

His spirit is dark, one of the darkest ones I've ever witnessed coming to this side and what it reveals to me is shocking. This man is abusive and volatile. Images of him beating people swarm in my view, as well as one death caused by his hand. I see the day he takes over a leader of a gang and the violence that is ensued because of it. I am disgusted as he appears in front of me. "What the hell is this!?" His voice booms.

"Oh, you're mistaken, sir." I respond knowing his question was rhetorical, "You're not in hell."

He glares at me. Literally glares at Death, he's a ballsy one. "Oh, yous a wise guy, huh?" He responds as he cracks his knuckles, ready to brawl.

"Just stating facts." I say as pretend to be uninterested and pick at my fingers just to piss him off even more. He races for me, but I extend my slender, skeletal hand out, freezing him in place with my power. Score one for Death! This one came ready to play.

He strains, veins popping out the muscles in his neck. Light catches his eye and he turns to look at the door. The very bright. Very red, door.

I scoff. "Oh sir! Now it would seem like you're about to be in hell. But I already knew that from seeing what your aura showed me."

"What do you mean what my aura showed you?" He questions with intense eyes.

I shrug now pretending to pick lint off my cloak just to get another rise out of him.

"Answer me, Demon!" he bellows, face reddening even in his apparition tone.

"Oh, I am so sorry you're mistaken, beast. I am not a demon. You'll meet plenty of those where you're going. I am Death, sir."

He tries to come at me again, clearly angered by my correction. His muscles tighten under his shirt, veins protruding more from the tension. He is still immobilized by my power so he remains

statuesque. His teeth grind together popping as his jaw moves, and he writhes viciously to break free of my hold. “I ain’t going through that door. Let me go and face me like a man!”

It’s cute how he thinks he can beat me in a fight. “You don’t have a choice, hot shot. And quit making requests from me like I owe you something. Either you go through, or it swallows you whole. I can hold you here until that happens. Regardless, your fate is sealed. Looks like you should have made some better decisions in your short, pathetic life.” I spit at him as I watch as Hell’s door inches slowly closer.

“Don’t let it take me!” He wails. He is almost convincing too. “I have cash! I’ll give you whatever you, or God want. Just don’t let me go there!”

“I don’t make the rules. And, what the hell am I going to use cash for anyway? That is a stupid way to bribe Death, idiot.” I snap my bony fingers, exposing them from the hem of my sleeve. Using my magic to move the man towards the gleaming red light as he struggles even harder against my hold. Lucifer will enjoy breaking this one for sure. His screams are finally swallowed as it dissipates closing the entrance to hell until the next poor soul is called.

If I didn’t have so many others to reap, I probably would have toyed with him more. But alas, he will be toyed with enough where he’s going.

After about thirty minutes, the call has lightened the load that it held on me. Almost all passengers from the flight have crossed over. Emergency response teams have arrived to the scene to begin their work as signals of flashing lights illuminate the landscape. Firefighters battle the blaze to cull the flames.

I study them, watching as they work. Their expressions grave, and empty. A few shed tears as they get to work pulling the now soulless bodies from the wreckage to identify them and inform their families. An unfortunate turning point in the lives of many, lives forever changed in the cruelest way.

But then I hear the faint song of death pulling me to one last person. That faint slow musical, chime ringing in my ear directing me to where I need to go. I let it drag me across the terrain to the edge of the water behind the tail of the plane. It’s a woman, her mid length blonde hair drifting back and forth in the current of the water. I see her eyes blink, her arm waving at her side trying to summon the strength to move her out of the water.

She appears to be in her mid-forties with a slim frame. She’s beautiful, even in this distressed state. But what is more curious, her blue eyes are locked on me, studying me. I cock my head to the side gazing at her in return. She can’t truly see me, can she?

“Please.” Her voice rasps. “Help me.”

I look over both my shoulders to see if there is anyone behind me, and press my hand against my chest, “Me? Are you talking to me?”

Her head nods slightly, eyes still fastened on me. A million questions run through my head. How does she see me? Who is she? Can she just see me because she is about to die? No, that one is stupid, no one can see me until after I reap their souls. I must be hallucinating, that has to be it. My magic must be drained because of all the souls I've helped today. That's all this is.

Padding over to her I watch those ocean blue eyes as they follow my every movement. She does see me, how peculiar. I glance behind me again just to be sure, still its only just me here with her.

Crouching down, I take in her body. Her leg is bent at an unnatural angle, it is for sure broken. Her arm still rising and falling into the waves. "I can help you." I say gently. "It will be quick." Her life force isn't as bright as it could be, the death song very faint but still calling to me. I know she's diminishing and she will eventually succumb to her injuries.

I hear her erratic heartbeat thrumming as I raise my scythe. Her eyes widen and she shakes her head. "No. No!" I release her essence in the next moment. Her life flashes before my eyes. She lived a good life, had two sons, both of which are now grown and married. Her life with her boys is what mattered most to her. She gave everything she could to make sure they grew up happy and successful. I admired her for that. She had a good husband too, one whom I am sure would miss her dearly.

"I didn't want this! I wanted you to help me!" She immediately falls to her knees in her soul form, grabbing at the bottom of still wet my robes. "Please don't take me. I was on my way to my son. He's having a little girl. Please, please let me see my granddaughter!" her eyes are full of heartache, longing.

"How did you think I'd be able to help you other than this?" I ask. Surly she knows what reapers do.

"I don't know, call for help maybe?" She retorts. She's a bit feisty, I like that.

I take her chin in my hand, forcing her to look up to where my face would be if my hood wasn't up. Instead of staring at me, she stares into blackness. "No one here can see me. No one but you. In the many years I've been doing this you're the only one who has spoke to me before coming to this side. This is the only way I can help you ma'am."

An emergency medical technician runs to her body, checking for a pulse. "I have a very faint pulse over here on this one!" He screams to his partner. They gently pull her a few feet from the water's edge, and crouch over her and begin to perform CPR.

I'm not surprised that she has a slight pulse, I did take her before she was completely gone from this world, maybe I should have waited a little while longer. All I wanted to do was help make this easier and help get her out of her misery.

"Please, Mr. Reaper. Let me go back." She pleads. Her gaze now on the people around her body. She releases me and crawls over to them, placing a hand across her chest and sobbing heavily.

“Call me Death, Mr. Reaper seems too formal. How were you able to see me just now?” I question.

She shrugs, not turning around, “I just could.”

“Have you seen any other reapers before in your life?” I pry.

She cranes her neck to look back at me. “No, Death, I haven’t. Why does this matter so much to you? You’re wasting time! Can’t you see I am fading? My heartbeat is weakening!”

“It matters because I exist here only to reap souls. No human has ever interacted with me, but yet you did! There has to be a reason! Wait.” I pause taking note of what she said. “You can hear your heartbeat?”

She closes her eyes for a moment and catches her breath like if she doesn’t, she will lash out at me. “Yes, I can hear my *failing* heart.”

Also, another unexpected thing for her to say. Being a soul heightened her senses to my ability. I scratch my chin and stare at her for what feels like an eternity. She again is focused on her body underneath the two people trying to resuscitate her.

The EMT workers still press her chest. I see a very faint light in my peripheral, but my gaze is trained on this woman. Would it be so bad if I let her go back? After all, she wasn’t one of the heavier calls, maybe they could get her stabilized and she could live a long, happy life. Her body doesn’t appear severely damaged other than her leg, she may survive, and if she doesn’t, well we will just end up meeting again.

I’ve never placed a soul back into a body before, but I contemplate it, because why should I send another person through the doors. There has been enough death here on this ground today. Too much, actually. My heart thunders in my ears. She is now back at my feet; her grip tightens on me. Pleading again.

“We’re losing her!” The first EMT grits out. “Get me a defibrillator!”

“But she’s wet! We can’t shock her!” the second EMT replies. Time is certainly of the essence now.

Placing my hand on the woman’s shoulder I say, “I’m going to try to send you back. I’m going to try to give you a life with your granddaughter. I can’t guarantee it will work. I’ve seen so much death today, but I want to take this chance to see life.” The words I spoke were true. I was curious about her but I did want something good to come out of this day more than I needed to know why she could see me.

In an act of defiance, my scythe catches her temple, and waves her ghostly form in the air, it swirls in reverse from when it was released towards her body. I gently tap it against the small hole that I

had made initially and close my eyes to focus all my power on sending her back. Willing my magic to help mend her enough to give her a chance.

All is quiet, everything is hanging on this moment. The EMT guys hang their heads as they pull their arms away from her fragile body. A look of defeat on their tired faces. I see a tear drop down one of their cheeks. “We lost her.”

Three words that I had no clue would affect me the way they did. I wanted to rage, to scream at the top of my lungs*. We lost her* echoed in the reveries of my mind. Those same words “we lost him” I remember hearing when I was lost years ago, and knowing there was no more hope left. Nothing that could change the hands of fate.

It didn’t work. It didn’t freaking work. I was such a fool for thinking I could gift life when my whole existence is based off taking it. I crash down to the ground onto my knees and slam my fists into the earth. There has to be more to my life than this!

A watery cough breaks through the glass, causing my focus to shift. It was her. She coughed, and is coughing, breathing. It worked, holy crap, it worked! I stand, watching the EMT guys as they become attentive to her again. The biggest smile creeps across my face.

Her aura shines brighter around her form now, conformation my magic healed enough of her to keep her on Earth for a while longer. She is alive, and sitting up against one of the technicians. The lone survivor of this fatal crash, and I helped make it happen. Me! For the first time in a long time, I felt like I had finally done something worthwhile. The feeling is so foreign to me.

I watch as they carefully put her body on a stretcher, and wheel her to an ambulance to go to the hospital. She stared at the spot I was standing as she was carted away. However, I knew there was no way that she was seeing me now and maybe she was in as deep of thought about her near-death experience as I was. I waved, just to be sure. She gave me no reaction.

That elation I felt had was quickly squandered, realizing I was back to only hanging with the dead. A small part of me hoped she would have waved back, giving me the connection I so craved with this world. My thoughts began drift back to not wanting to be stuck in this cycle anymore, to feeling that there has to be more out there for me. More for me, than just this.

Lauren Corbett

“Mr. Frankenstein, YOU Are the Father!”

The romantic air of Bavaria's late-autumn world did nothing to quell my frustration with Victor Frankenstein. Two and a half years had passed since he left for the University of Ingolstadt, and I heard nothing from the man since. He hadn't written to me, to his father, not even to his darling Elizabeth. When the elder Frankenstein approached me with a proposition to go see what was wrong with my old friend, I rushed to gather my things and prepare my friendly ambush.

School must have taken Victor some time to adjust to. We told ourselves this when the first few months passed without a word. After two years, though, one would imagine he could manage enough time to send a short *Hey, How are you?* I walked briskly down the street in the direction of my old friend's dormitory, mulling over how I'd approach giving the man an earful.

I still took the time to observe the scenery. Orange leaves were illuminated by the late evening sun, giving the city a heavenly glow. It was a lovely collegiate town. It would have made for a stunning vacation spot if Victor bothered to invite anyone to visit. I held my head high with my shoulders back, politely smiling at anyone who offered a friendly wave, but on the inside, I was rolling in turmoil. I had a whole monologue prepared. I was armed to the teeth with a script of concern, solace, and a neat little guilt-trip to wrap it up. At one point, as I drew nearer to the dorm, I found myself mumbling parts of the speech to myself.

"Inconsiderate… No, no… *discourteous.* You've been discourteous to your family, Victor." I nodded to myself. I was trying my very best to remember every point both his father and Elizabeth wanted me to add into my mega-lecture. "Yeah, that works. Victor, I'm— *we're* worried about you. Elizabeth's sent a letter with me, and…"

I was rambling to myself for so long that I almost walked past Victor's dormitory. I paused, looking in a window to check my reflection, then huffed a breath. I knocked on the door with a heavy fist. While I waited for Victor to answer, I could feel my emotions running hotter. I feared I would scare the man off with a bombardment of accusations and rage before I could even say hello.

That is, until Victor opened the door. Upon seeing him, all my indignance vanished. I was overcome with a softer, gentler feeling of affection, as well as a deep worry for my friend's health.

Victor was always meek looking, but he looked positively *sickly* that day. After two years, it seemed he had grown disturbingly thinner. He was in wrinkled day clothes that swallowed his small frame. His eyes and cheeks were gaunt. Victor's body was blanched like he hadn't seen the sun in weeks. His hair had grown far longer than considered proper, hanging over his eyes like a greasy black mop.

Victor recognized me instantly, his face brightening with a smidge of rosy tint. *Good lord!* I thought to myself. Despite my concern, I was still overjoyed to see my friend. "My dear Frankenstein! How glad I am to see you!" I erupted immediately upon him opening the door.

Victor returned my pleasant greeting with a smile of his own. “My dear Clerval,” he said, his voice raspy and as thin as his grin, “it gives me great delight to see you, too. How are my brothers? Elizabeth? My father?” While his words were warm, his body language told another story. He hadn’t invited me in, and he hadn’t stepped out to greet me with an embrace as he normally would have. He stood in the entrance, keeping the door half-shut and his body slouched forward.

I tried not to cringe at his obvious affliction. Perhaps this was the reason for his refusal to write. Had I known he was ill, I would have come prepared with a kinder approach. My entire lecture was metaphorically crumpled up and tossed in the bin, and I found myself being eaten alive by guilt.

“They’re very well, and very happy, only a little uneasy that they haven’t heard from you.” I chuffed humorlessly. His eyes watched me unblinkingly, their dark hue piercing my soul as I shifted my weight on my feet. “In fact, they sent me to lecture you on the very subject. But, as it seems, you are… not quite alright, are you?”

Victor seemed caught off guard by my comment. He tilted his head to the side and squinted his eyes. Then, he opened his mouth to respond but flinched when a clatter rang out from inside the dorm.

I tried to peer my head inside. “Do you have a roommate?”

Victor wrinkled his nose at me. “No, I live alone. It’s only…” He blanched, then straightened his posture. “Heavens, it seems, um… Well, it was lovely to see you, Henry. Tell my father and brothers I am well. I’ll write to you all soon. Tell Elizabeth I think of her fondly. Goodbye!”

He slammed the door in my face. I took a moment to process his sudden shift in mood. Two years, not a single word from my oldest friend, and all he says is *I’ll write soon?* To say I was stunned would be an understatement.

The anger I felt came rushing back tenfold. I cast aside the etiquette I was taught since birth and thrusted the door open, sans invitation. His dorm was a neat little apartment, styled in the Bavarian taste with wood accents and cozy, cream-colored walls. It was sparsely decorated, but it made up for in personality with papers, books, and various ornaments strewn around the room.

“Is that any way to welcome a guest?” I bellowed. “You get out here and greet your friend as you’re supposed to!”

More clatter came from upstairs. Perhaps he was hiding a tryst, and he didn’t want me to run back to tattle to Elizabeth. The fool must have deemed my loyalty totally blind. Victor was my friend, but so was Elizabeth, and I was not ignorant of their feelings for one another. I was no gutless coward, and I would confront Victor that very moment for dishonoring the person he claimed to be so enamored with.

I trudged up the stairs and stormed into the room where all the racket came from. There, I saw no affair taking place. The thing Victor stood in front of was no woman, nor human man. It was a terrifying

creature. Inky black hair trailed past its huge shoulders in the style of a woman's, and it was slick with unwashed oils. It had a gargantuan figure of bulging muscles and near translucent skin. I'd never seen someone so large, and surely no clothing existed to cover its body, so it wore rags for modesty's sake. Stitches were sewn in random places around its body. Arms, legs, hands, its neck— all its parts seemed mismatched, some pieces too large or too small. It was a patchwork abomination made completely of other's body parts

I shrieked the instant I laid eyes on the thing. Both Victor and the monster jolted. The beast joined in my terror with its own horrifying scream, rumbling the floorboards as it carried a trembling reverberation. It grabbed something heavy, an encyclopedia, lobbed it straight at my head.

I ducked and scanned the room for something to defend myself with. "What in God's name!" I cried. I grabbed an umbrella and hoisted it like it was a saber. I was prepared to engage in combat with the Goliath, and I was the David that would make it fall. However, my weapon was yanked from my grasp and tossed to the side by none other than Victor.

"Do not do that! He doesn't like loud noises," he hissed.

I pointed at the mass of flesh in the corner and spluttered, "*Him?* That's a monster! Why do you have a *monster* in your *home,* Victor?" The beast flinched at my shouting, but it only made Victor gasp affrontedly.

His mouth screwed itself into a sneer at my words. "His name is *Adam*, and he's not…" His expression softened, as did his voice, and he brushed his hair away from his face. He said, "I can explain —"

"Is this why you haven't written? Because of this *thing?"*

The creature moved out of the corner of my eye. I jumped and raised my arms in a defensive stance but paused when I saw what it was doing. Instead of charging at me, like I imagine any beast would do, it was curled up into a ball in the corner of the room. It was making low, short hiccups, and I realized it was weeping. Its giant body trembled as it pressed itself further into its knees.

Victor shot me a glare. "Now look what you've done. You upset him. Great work, Clerval." He tutted like *I* was the one who caused this ruckus. The nerve!

My rebuttal died on my tongue as I watched Victor carefully approach it… or *him,* as my friend insisted. He spoke quietly to the man-thing, inching closer like one would do to a wild animal.

Adam warbled something and jutted his chin out at me. When he saw I was staring at him, he tucked his head back in his arms and continued sniveling.

Victor spoke softly, "I know. It's alright."

“He’s *scary!”* Adam moaned.

“Oh, poor thing. He didn’t mean to scare you.” Victor shot a poisonous glare back at me and silently urged me to draw nearer. “Did you, Henry?”

I frowned and shook my head. Victor furrowed his brows and mouthed, *Tell him,* through gritted teeth. It became apparent I was not going to win this argument.

“No,” I relented.

Victor smiled and cooed at Adam again, “That’s right. And Henry’s going to apologize for causing such a fuss.”

I scoffed and wanted to say, *absolutely not!* But stopped short when I saw Adam peek at me. After getting used to the initial shock, I saw that Adam wasn’t *so* horrific as I first thought. I could see clearly now that he meant no harm outright. His aged face held a contrasting aura of innocence, with round, pale, watery eyes and quivering lower lip. Why, he was no more intimidating in nature than a lamb.

“I’m…” I tried to steady myself. Looking back, I almost wished it had been an affair Victor was keeping secret. This was incredibly bizarre, to say the least. “I’m sorry, Adam.”

Adam slowly blinked at me, then at Victor. Victor smiled, a more genuine one than what I first saw, and helped Adam to his feet. He stood at least a foot and a half taller than me. Still, he slumped where he stood, and half hid himself behind Victor.

Victor said, “See? All is well. No need for tears.” He mumbled something about Adam going to play. The giant… *whatever he was* bumbled off into the next room, leaving me and Victor in solitude.

Victor strode to his desk, grabbed two glasses and a flask, and walked me into the sitting area. He flopped down on his chair, which otherwise would have been in mint condition if not for the new stains, teeth marks, and scratches. I followed suit, but jumped up when I landed on a hard, lumpy object. Several metal measuring spoons looped into a ribbon was left abandoned on the seat cushion. I looked at Victor, who simply offered, “He likes to make noise.” After a moment to sip and collect his thoughts, he regaled me with a fantastic tale that I never would have believed if I hadn’t seen the product myself.

“I thought I scared him off, but when I woke up, he was still there. Peeking at me through my bed curtains. I didn’t know what else to do,” Victor said. He motioned helplessly to the giant, who was busying himself with stacking textbooks as high as they could in an uneven, wobbly tower.

I was shocked, to say the least. Victor’s refusal to share *how* he raised this creature to life only added to my skepticism, but the proof was right in front of me. I could hardly wrap my head around it, even after his lengthy breakdown of the situation. I found it increasingly difficult to find any of it out of

character, however. I recalled a time in our youth when the young Frankenstein devoured books about the occult— books that I once thought were laughably fictitious. It was an interest that teetered on obsession. Leave it to Victor to raise the dead for his undergraduate thesis.

"Do you understand what you've done? This is absurd," I said, lowering my voice. Adam seemed to grow skittish whenever I grew too loud, and I made a point to keep this in mind from then on. "What were you hoping to accomplish in the first place?"

"I wanted to create life. And so, I did," Victor replied lazily. "But I certainly wasn't expecting *this,* if that's what you're asking."

There was another clattering sound, followed by a shrieking giggle. Adam's tower finally toppled, and the action proved most entertaining to the new man. He clapped and got to work building another book tower.

I said, cautiously, "If this experiment didn't work, then why don't you…" I tried to use silence to insinuate the meaning of my words, but Victor only stared back at me, blinking owlishly. "… Start over?"

"No." His firm answer left me more rattled than before. Victor leaned over to his desk and grabbed an old journal. He flipped through the worn parchment pages and stated flatly, "That is not an option. He isn't some inanimate object, he's alive. That isn't very ethical, is it?"

I scoffed, "And *you're* the moral expert now? Don't be foolish."

"I understand your frustration, but what's done is done. I cannot go back and change my actions. I've accepted that," Victor said. He turned the journal to show me his scribbled notes. "He's truly extraordinary. He's learning much faster than I imagined— he learned how to speak in a matter of hours!"

In that moment, Victor reminded me of the young couples back home after welcoming a happy new edition to the family. Victor spoke about Adam with a sense of wonder and pride, much like a father would about his own son. Yet, he also seemed lost and unsure of himself. Victor spoke with great conviction, but the dark circles under his eyes and complete mess in the house told a different story.

He sunk further into his chair and said, "He's going to change the world. I'm just not sure how. Not yet."

It was clear that Victor was in over his head. He wouldn't ask for help; his pride always got the better of him. I, myself, felt pity for the man. This whole situation felt implausible. I was unsure if Victor would be subjected to a legal penalty for his actions, or if anyone would accept this idea of reanimation as factual.

Would it be acceptable for me to turn my back on him in this time of need? And Adam, well, he was admittedly starting to grow on me. Now that I knew he wasn't a threat, his naivete and curiosity were bizarrely charming. He was Victor's creation— perhaps even something akin to his child.

If I was to go mad, I was resolved to at least be sensible about it. "He isn't going to change the world in a toga," I murmured, rubbing my face vigorously. "He will need to be clothed properly. And if you want his brain to develop correctly, he'll need a tutor. We may need to go over his diet, as well. Does he like to eat anything in particular?"

Victor stared at me, seemingly bewildered at my inquiries. "I don't believe so, on account that he hasn't eaten."

I was sure this man was going to cause me a great deal of stress in the next few weeks. Victor may have been gifted academically, but common sense was not a trait he could boast in equal measure. I said shrilly, "You haven't fed him?"

"He never said he was hungry," Victor defended himself.

"It's fair to assume he doesn't know how to describe hunger yet, isn't it?" I snapped. He frowned, like this thought didn't occur to him before. "Clearly, you need to get some rest. I'll watch Adam, and *feed him,* while you catch up on some much-needed sleep."

If Victor had the energy for it, he probably would have refuted my order. Thankfully he only hesitated for a moment, then silently retired to his bedchamber. While preparing a meal for the giant newborn, my mind was buzzing with possible paths to take next. Victor and I would be a good team, but I knew we would inevitably need more help.

My mind and heart clashed in a heated battle. On one hand, the idea of taking care of not *just* a mal adjusted, horribly ill Victor, but his abominably miraculous son as well was making me nauseous with indignance. On the other, how could I refuse? My closest friend, the confident, inquisitive, sensitive Victor, who would rather torment himself than ask for the smallest favor… I couldn't bear it. I resolved myself to shut out any prejudice or predisposed thought I had before entering Victor's home.

Adam, despite being alive for barely a full day's length, waited for me to finish with the politeness of a hungry, yet patient child. It was odd, I thought, that despite the two having no real relation, he resembled Victor at a near uncanny level. I saw it in way he murmured, "Thank you, Henry," in his slouched, crouched posture, even the wide and ever-curious shape in his jaundiced eyes, all of it was so *familiar.*

Perhaps, I thought, Adam isn't so unnatural.

Anna Goodwin

“Chapter 2 : Acting on the New Path”

Isabella Winnova is a sweet woman who’s journey led her to become an assistant administrator. When she finally found her niece Jasmine, she felt like this was her purpose. She just had to talk to a lawyer about how to proceed after knowing she found her niece. Luckily one of her neighbors worked as a paralegal for a law firm and she was able to refer her to a lawyer who knew the next steps of finding someone, “Hey Janice, are you still a paralegal?” She remembered asking, hopefully.

Janice, a woman who was the type to give out all and any information someone would need, happily responded. “Isabella, yes I am still a paralegal, you know my offer still stands right?” she asked. Isabella nodded.

“Of course I know that, and I thank you. I finally just might get to take you up on that offer.” Janice’s mouth dropped, she knew how long Isabella had waited to find a lawyer, this must mean that she found her niece. A bright smile appeared on her face.

“Isabella!! No way! You found her, I can refer you to a lawyer now!!?”

Isabella laughed and nodded, “I know I did not think this would happen either, I was running out of faith.”

Janice sympathized with her and said, “This is so exciting now! Ok so, I have thought about who to refer you to for years now and I think I have figured it out. His name is James Davenport and here is his office’s information. Now, I have to go but you have got to tell me everything and I mean everything !! Should we have our weekly Friday cocktail session?”

Isabella nodded. Her boss Diana, knew that she found her niece and knew that Isabella’s next steps were to find a lawyer, so she should not have been so surprised on that Monday morning when she saw her assistant principal practically skipping into the front office. She smiled brightly. “ What are you so excited about Isabella? You are practically leaping out of your seat!!” Isabella excitedly told her the news and she was early enough that she could call the law office and at least leave a message. That day she checked her phone at lunch. It seemed too good to be true because the law office responded right away. She immediately called him back, and scheduled an appointment for next Tuesday afterschool.

Then she saw Jasmine, she could not act any different, Jasmine did not know Isabella was her aunt. The next Tuesday she met with the lawyer who said that she should spend a year getting to know her and her situation and if unfortunately her hunch about her niece being mistreated was right then she could become a foster parent.

Once the year had passed she met with the school counselor and the school social worker and they all agreed on presenting the idea to Jasmine. Once Jasmine was given the information, she agreed.

As she was driving home that day, she was alarmed, what did she just do? Did she just agree to fostering a teenager? She was not a parent, never was one and she was single. She lived in a decent neighborhood though thanks to her job at CyberCanvas. It was not like she was poor by any means and her niece would have a full closet, a bed, a pantry full of food and basic care products. It seemed like her niece did not have a lot of those things.

Over the past year Isabella had learned that Jasmine did not eat enough, was very timid, lacked knowledge of basic care and was tired all the time. Jasmine was an incoming sophomore so she could not drive yet, but she would still have access to Isabella's office like everyone else.

Alright, I have got this, she's been through a lot so why should I not try? She told herself.

She immediately told Janice what was happening and Janice told her that she was there to help her navigate fostering. "Ok, first things first, do you know when she's coming? You have got a lot to do to prepare for her." Janice went down the list of all the possible things that Isabella would need to do. Isabella stared at the list completely overwhelmed, what was all this and how was she supposed to get all this done before Jasmine arrived when they did not say when she would arrive. What should she use as a comforter for a highschooler because she did not think a highschooler would appreciate character bedding, but maybe they would because she does not know. What kind of entertainment should she get her, she does not seem to have allergies to food but what if she is allergic to something? What would she do?

She took a deep breath, most of this stuff would take some time for her to figure out. Just as she would have to be patient with Jasmine, Jasmine would have to be patient with her. On Jasmine's first day with Isabella she went to school as normal but then she went home with Isabella. She was frightened and unsure of herself. She apologized frequently and was always afraid of everything and every noise. The refrigerator made a funny noise and Jasmine jumped, Immediately Isabella jumped up and explained it was just the refrigerator she would be alright. That first night was rough, the poor kid had nightmares she felt like she could not breathe. The same scene repeated in her mind. The dream had her mother, a knife and a maternal figure, the figure was trying to protect her but she could not protect her, she watched her mother kill the figure. Her only hope was gone. She would wake up with a start and try to keep quiet and act like she was just fine so, she did not wake her new foster mother Ms. Winnova.

Isabella always leapt out of bed. She did not hear Jasmine cry out but she knew something was wrong. She did not want to go to Jasmine because she did not want to embarrass her. After spending a year with Jasmine she found out that she was very embarrassed about nightmares so she just waited until she thought that things had died down and then went and checked on her, just to make sure she was not in need of medical attention. It was a long night for Isabella, but she knew that it was an even longer night for Jasmine. That morning at breakfast she braced the topic. "Hey sweetheart, how was your first night here? I know that the firsts in life are tough. Is there any way I can help you adjust? I know we do

not really know each other now and I hope to change that, but for now I could just sit with you sometime. I do not expect you to tell me everything about yourself right away or anything like that. We can just sit." Jasmine smiled and she sat with her in silence until it was time to go to school.

All of these things such as hearing footsteps on the floor, feeling a familiar but not wanted texture such as a spatula would cause Jasmine to remember feeling scared and unsafe.

One day, Isabella was getting ready to go out with her coworkers and she moved too fast, she heard Jasmine absolutely freak out. She started shaking and went into a panic attack.

If people saw some of the things Jasmine had trouble with they would say she is spoiled but Isabella knew in her heart that was not true, in fact the girl needed to be spoiled with love. She did not give her a ton of gifts but she did provide love and safety which was all Jasmine wanted and needed.

Megan Paeth

“The Reaction of Love”

I'll weave a garland just for you,
And dance beneath the stars' soft glow,
If you will be my shepherd, dear,
In fields where gentle wildflowers grow.

Hand in hand, we'll roam the meadows,
Where silver streams serenely flow,
I’ll sing a song to chase away
The clouds that steal our joy’s warm glow.

With morning birds as our sweet chorus,
And blossoms bright beneath our feet,
We'll set aside our worries,
And share sweet laughter, light and fleet.

But shepherd, heed my tender plea,
For love must flourish like the willow,
With roots entwined in joy and sorrow,
A bond that makes our spirits mellow.

Ji’keryah Hill

“In Life's Garden”

In life’s vast garden, success takes root,
Like a vibrant flower in full bloom,
Its petals forged from perseverance,
And the steadfast will that breaks the gloom.

With the fragrance of triumph in the air,
Tears and sweat have watered the ground,
Fueled by fervor and unwavering faith,
In the journey’s lessons, true growth is found.

Success is not a fixed destination,
But a path of learning, rich and wide,
A voyage through both trials and triumphs,
An odyssey where we discover our pride.

So tend your garden with patient care,
And watch how your dreams begin to rise,
For each bloom is proof of your tenacity,
A testament to your courage, bold and wise.

Ji’keryah Hill

“22 a Day”

I got the text. The one where your heart sinks and you feel as if you’re gasping for air. “I have nothing left…. Please let my family see the girls…. It’s all they’ll have left of me…. I can’t do this…. I can’t hurt you… please call the police before you come home…. You truly made me happy Julie Miller…. I love you now and forever til death do us part. You’re free Boo, you’re free now. You’re my everything Boo!”

As I raced to get home, shaking in fear, hundreds of thoughts went through my head. I sped up the driveway, threw my car in park, and ran in the house. When I turned the corner into the dining room, I saw him. My husband had shot himself in the head.

My husband, Matt, was a proud marine. He served in Afghanistan from 2010-2011. He was the driver of the MRAP vehicle for his team, and they did more patrols than he could even begin to count.

He was told after returning from deployment not to report any of his medical issues. For years those thoughts festered. Matt would tell of some of the things he saw but kept a lot to himself as well. I think it was out of protection of me as he didn’t want me to know of all the horrors he saw.

Over the years of our marriage, Matt would consume himself in house remodel projects to keep his mind busy. He told me if he even stopped to spend time with us the thoughts would take over, but at the same time, he missed out on so much. We decided he should go to counseling to get a diagnosis of PTSD and then try to get disability. It worked, he had PTSD, and he got the disability rating to have extra income. Then the counseling stopped, but the checks did not.

In the months leading up to his death, Matt was drinking more to numb the pain. He was falling into a depression, but even in the lowest of lows, he would never have sought help from the VA. He was too proud to ask for help. Neither myself, or his closest friends, ever imagined he was at the point he was.

It was July 4th of 2019. Matt was drinking. Our girls, Mackenzie, 6 and Sofia, 4 and myself went to get dinner with my parents. He stood by my car in the garage and gave the girls hugs, kissed their foreheads, and told them he loved them and said goodbye. We said our goodbyes and we left. Never did I think that would be the last time we’d see him alive.

Matt prepared. He put our three dogs upstairs in our bedroom, turned on the fan for them and shut the door. He then got two of our wedding pictures out of a frame and went back downstairs to the living room and put them on the bar top. He got two little gifts the girls had made him and set those next to the wedding pictures. He closed the front windows and shut the curtains, then drank an entire bottle of whiskey. When he knew he could do it, he sent me the text at 6:05 pm. I called him immediately, three times with no answer, and I was home 5 minutes later.

When I turned that corner into the living room, I ran to him and just started screaming at him to wake up. He was sitting on a bar stool slumped over the bar top. The right side of his head was gone, splattered all over the wall, and covering the floor. In a puddle of his own blood, I could see faint breaths coming from his mouth.

I called 911, and while on the phone with them, I ran yelling across the street to our friends but got no answer. Thankfully our neighbor heard me and asked what was wrong, “he shot himself, Matt shot himself!” I shrieked. He went inside with me and the operator told us to get Matt to the floor.

“But his head is just open!” I cried. She said to put something on it for pressure and to get him flat. Sean, our neighbor, grabbed a roll of paper towels and pushed it to Matt’s head. While he did that, I grabbed Matt’s body, completely lifeless, and we laid him down.

I began CPR, his eyes were slit open, and I remember just saying over and over to him “why did you do this?”. Sean shook his head and told me not to say that. So instead, I told him how much we loved him and how much we needed him. I have no recollection of how long I did CPR for, but it felt like an eternity.

I saw a police officer; I had never been so relieved. I thought, help is here, they’re going to save him. They escorted me outside where I saw two ambulances, and four police cars. Then I saw him on the stretcher, his shirt was cut open, and they loaded him into an ambulance. His official time of death was 7:03 pm.

The days, and weeks after were a complete blur. What stood out most to me when I was making calls to organize just about every aspect of our lives, were two women I spoke to from the VA. They had both experienced the same tragedy with their veteran fathers.

After several months of grieving and processing, I wanted to find out more about “22 A Day”. I was startled, taken aback. While data may show the exact number 22 isn’t accurate, even 1 veteran suicide a day is too many. Our veterans deserve and need more. My husband needed more.

Julie Miller

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“Learning to Love My New Sister”

I was in the fourth grade when my parents separated. I was so distraught and confused. In the blink of an eye, I went from being my dad’s babygirl to being pushed into the role of the woman of the house. At just nine years old, I was getting my younger siblings to baseball and softball practice, helping with homework, assisting with dinner, and managing countless other tasks. As the oldest sibling, I didn’t know any other way. It was overwhelming.

As I grew older, I became more molded into the role of the “sister-mom”—the third parent. Deep down, I felt the weight of responsibility pressing against my childhood, squeezing it into something secondary. The pressure, the stress, and the constant feeling of being overwhelmed at such a young age are things I wouldn’t wish on anyone.

When I was fourteen, my dad started dating again. And just like that, it was as if I had been demoted. I went from “sister-mom” back to being a child, as his new girlfriend, Rhonda stepped in as head of the household. With her came a new sister, Aubri—one just six months younger than me. I was thrilled. She quickly became my best friend. We begged our parents to let us have sleepovers, stayed up baking, making TikToks, and binge-watching Netflix shows like *Outer Banks, Love is Blind,* and *Euphoria.* People often asked if we were twins. We went to Bible study together on Wednesdays. I loved calling her my sister.

A year later, our parents got married, and a few weeks before the wedding, Aubri and Rhonda moved in with us. At first, it felt like a dream—like I was living with my best friend. But slowly, the dream unraveled.

Having spent six years as the "sister-mom," I felt like I was losing control. My voice in the house carried less weight. My routines were disrupted, my authority over my siblings slipping away. Worse, it started to feel like Aubri was trying to sabotage the very thing I was so proud of—our parents’ marriage. She constantly stirred up arguments, ruined date nights, and acted out.

It started small: Aubri would interrupt me when I gave my siblings—Kellen and Karsyn—instructions, or she’d roll her eyes when I reminded them to clean their rooms. One evening, I was standing in the kitchen, hands still damp from washing dishes, when I told Kellen to take out the trash. Aubri, sprawled across the living room couch with her phone in hand, cut in with a smirk, “You’re not the boss of us anymore.”

My anger was fueled as the moments kept stacking. On family movie nights, Aubri would change the film my siblings and I had picked. She’d whisper things to them during dinner, making them giggle at jokes I wasn’t part of. My once seamless role in our blended family was unraveling thread by thread, and no one else seemed to notice.

It wasn’t just about routines or rules anymore—it felt personal. Aubri was claiming the space I had once filled, and I didn’t know how to stop it without looking jealous or petty. But deep down, I wasn’t angry—I was heartbroken. I missed how things used to be between us, before we let our new roles cloud the bond we’d built.

There was a night when my Dad, Kevin, and Rhonda planned a dinner out. As soon as they left, she slammed her bedroom door and refused to come out. Ten minutes later, she texted her mom that she was "sick" and needed her. They came home early, worried, only to find her perfectly fine and scrolling on TikTok.

Every word sparked a fight. We went from inseparable to combative, from sisters to strangers.

On one specific occasion, it was a Friday evening, rushing to get ready for the school football game. It was 6:15, and the game started at 6:30. I tore through my drawers looking for my school’s tie-dye T-shirt and couldn’t find it anywhere. I stormed into Aubri’s room—and there she was, standing in the mirror, taking selfies in the shirt I’d been searching for all week.

My heart was racing. I clenched my fists and made an effort to remain composed. "Why couldn’t you just ask to borrow it?" Anticipating a lie, I inquired. Instead, she apologized for not asking and immediately returned the shirt to me. I briefly felt relieved that she had admitted it, but her meek apology made me feel even more alienated. The shirt wasn't the only factor. It was about how simple it had become for her to take something from me without asking, as if my position in the family had become irrelevant.

That moment stuck with me. Why wasn’t she the best friend I knew just a few months ago? Slowly, I began to understand. She was going through her own version of change—sharing her mom with a new man and four new siblings. The stress, the adjustment—it had been too much.

I hated the tension in our home. One day, I sat down with her and said, “I miss how we were before our parents got married.” She went blank-faced and stared at me. After about ten seconds, she stuttered, “I wish they never did.” My heart dropped. I couldn’t believe she said that. Seeing my dad happy and building a family made me proud. But then again, everyone reacts differently. I asked her, “Why?” She walked away without saying a word.

A week later, I sent her a message:

> "Honestly, I’m just really stressed with the move, and it’s been a lot to adjust to. I didn’t expect things to feel so different, and it’s been hard trying to find my place in all of this. With everything changing so quickly, sometimes I feel like I’m just getting lost in the mix, especially with my mom. It feels like you forgot about me. I know I’ve been short with you, and I’m sorry. I’m just struggling to handle everything, and it’s been hard to express that without making things worse."

A sense of relief washed over me. I had the perfect reply to rebuild what was broken:

"I really appreciate you opening up to me about everything. I had no idea you were feeling like that, and I'm sorry things have been tough for you. Moving and all the changes can be overwhelming, and I can see how it might feel like you're getting lost in the shuffle. Maybe it could help if we talked to your mom together? I know she cares about you, but sometimes it's hard for her to see things from your perspective, especially with everything going on. We could sit down and share how we're both feeling, just to make sure you're not feeling left behind. Love you."

After sending that message, I darted down the hallway and hugged her. We both broke down crying, like a dam finally giving way. I explained why I had started acting the way I did. I addressed things she did and said that hurt me. We decided to move forward.

We walked down to Rhonda's bedroom and shared our conversation. She said, "I love you both, and as a family, we will do better to be more loving and patient with each other." That gave me so much hope. We agreed to listen more, be patient, and make sure no one felt left behind again.

Fast forward four years, and we are closer now than ever—even more than when we first met. We o on trips together to visit family, whether it is a road trip to Florida, a flight to Chicago or New York, or driving to the mountains for the weekend. We eat and drink after each other like animals. This experience taught me that family isn't just about sharing a last name—it's about patience, understanding, and choosing to love each other even when things get difficult. Now, I approach conflict with an open heart, knowing that sometimes all it takes is a conversation to turn tension into trust. The word "stepsister" never crosses my mind. That is my sister. That is my best friend.

Kennedi Moore

"The Dead Walking"

ONE: Journal Entry — Six Months Later

Honestly… losing someone who's always been there for you? It *hurts*.

I don't think anyone ever prepares you for how hard it hits when someone you love *dies*. Grandma Jane used to say that death is a child's first heartbreak. I didn't really understand what she meant back then. I do now.

Ever since she left, everything feels... louder. Not in the fun way, like when we'd bake cookies and she'd hum along to old songs on the radio. But in the heavy, chaotic way.

The kind of loud that makes you want to disappear.

My sisters—Jade, Jayla, Jaliyah—they still argue over clothes and who gets the car like nothing ever changed. Jayden's always running around, trying to get someone—*anyone*—to play with him. And Mom? She barks out things she needs through half-closed doors, never stopping to really *look* at me. Dad's

hardly around anymore. Comes home late. Leaves early. I don't even know if he notices that I've stopped speaking at dinner.

It's not that I don't love them. I do. So much it hurts sometimes. But ever since Grandma passed, it's like there's this invisible wall between me and everyone else.

She was the only one who really *saw* me. No explanations needed. Just hugs that fixed things and a voice that made life feel softer, gentler.

Now I keep all the things I wish I could say stuffed inside this journal, hidden under my mattress. It's the only place I can breathe.

I still write to her. I like to think she's reading somehow. That maybe if I write the right words, they'll find her wherever she is.

Today marks six months.

I watched my sister's laugh from the crack in my door. Jade was showing them something on her phone. I stood there, trying to remember what it felt like to be a part of that noise—to be able to laugh like that.

But I couldn't.

So, I closed the door. Sat at my desk. And I wrote:

"I wish I knew how to say what I feel without breaking everything around me. I wish you were still here. I think I'm disappearing a little every day, and nobody notices but me. Is this what growing up is?"

Tears came, but I swallowed them back. I didn't want them to win.

Outside, the laughter kept going.
Inside, it was quiet.
But in that silence, for the first time in a while, I let myself *feel*.

And I don't know why, but something inside me whispered… *this is the start of something.*

Maybe change doesn't come with thunder. Maybe it starts in a whisper—one only *you* can hear.

—Jordyn

Chapter 2 "The Crew"

Participants: Jordyn, Amaya, Nia, Kennedi

Date: Tuesday, 3:17 PM

Mood: Passive-aggressive meets emotional breakthrough

Amaya:

you really acting brand new now huh lol 👀

Jordyn:

brand new? nah. i just stopped letting y'all treat me like i don't exist.

Amaya:

girl NOBODY treated you like that
you just started being weird and distant. that's on YOU.

Jordyn:

"weird" or just finally being real about who i am?
y'all only liked the version of me that kept quiet.

Kennedi:

okay… what is happening rn

Amaya:

nah we being real now?? cool.
you was the one who said you had a crush on ayanna but was too scared to say anything.
don't act bold now lol.

Jordyn:

wow. so we dropping secrets now??
you wanna talk scared? how about when you cried over that boy last summer and begged me not to tell nia?

Nia:

WAIT WHAT???
(Crying Emoji)

Kennedi:

bruhhhh this went from 0 to 100…

Nia:

so y'all been fake for months huh? this is wild.

Jordyn:

nah. i've just been quiet.
but silence ain't the same as fake.

Amaya:

you been moving funny.

acting like you better than us or something.

Jordyn:

no. i just stopped shrinking.

i got tired of feeling invisible around the people who were supposed to see me.

Nia:

honestly jordyn… you changed.

this ain't the same vibe.

idk what's going on with you but you been on some other stuff.

and i'm not picking sides but amaya's been real with me since day one 🤷🏾‍♀️

Kennedi:

...

Jordyn:

cool.

[Jordyn left the chat]

Later that night…

Jordyn sat on the edge of her bed, her phone face-down. The chat notifications were silent now, but her heart wasn't. It thudded with everything she'd wanted to say for months.

The screenshots, the betrayal, the silence—they hurt. But not more than holding back who she was.

She pulled out her journal, flipped past old pages of confusion and whispered feelings, and wrote:

> "I lost them, but I found me."
>
> And for the first time in a long time, she meant it.

Chapter 3: Still Loud

The silence after the group chat ended wasn't really silent at all.

It was **loud**.

Not in words, but in everything that filled the spaces where people used to be.

The empty seat next to her in Chemistry—**loud**.

The quiet lunches spent scrolling through old memories—**loud**.

The hallway glances that looked past her like she was glass—**so loud**, they rang in her ears.

Jordyn thought cutting ties would bring peace, and in a way, it did. But peace doesn't always mean quiet. Sometimes, it's just learning to live inside the noise without letting it drown you.

And life didn't slow down just because her world got smaller.

At home, the loudness hadn't faded.
Her sisters were still fighting over everything and nothing.
Her mom's footsteps still echoed through the hall like orders.
Jayde still shouted for her when no one else was listening.

And her dad? Still working late. Still slipping in and out of their lives like a shadow.

But this time, Jordyn wasn't just *hiding* in the noise—she was starting to *hear* it differently.
Every slammed door, every muffled laugh, every "what's wrong with her?" wasn't just chaos anymore. It was a rhythm. A beat. A backdrop to her own voice, finally coming through.

She began sitting with herself more—really sitting. Not scrolling. Not journaling to escape. Just… listening.

To her breathing.
To her thoughts.
To the ache that still lived in the corner of her chest, quiet but not silent.

And then—Ayanna.

She was another kind of loud. The kind that didn't shout, but still filled the room. Her quiet confidence hummed like bass Jordyn could feel in her ribs. They started talking more in class, about books, music, the way certain lyrics hit harder at night. Ayanna wasn't pushy. She didn't ask Jordyn to explain herself or pretend to understand everything. She just *showed up*, again and again, with the kind of presence that made the rest of the world hush—if only for a moment.

Jordyn didn't know what it meant yet. She wasn't ready to label anything. But she knew one thing: Ayanna's quiet wasn't empty. It wasn't hiding. It was strength. And it made Jordyn want to be strong, too.

One night, while the rest of the house thumped with noise, Jordyn sat on her bedroom floor, back against the door, knees pulled to her chest. Her journal was open beside her, but she didn't write this time.

She just whispered to herself.

“It’s still loud… but maybe I’m not afraid of it anymore.”

It wasn’t a declaration.
It wasn’t even confidence.
But it was real.

And that was enough for now.

Chapter 4: Real Ones Only

10th grade started right after, but Jordyn wasn’t in the mood for people. She kept to herself mostly, headphones in, head down. The only person she talked to at school was Tara—cool, chill, always kept it real. They sat together in class, had lunch in their little corner, and slowly, Jordyn started feeling like maybe she had one real friend again.

Then came the trip.

Jordyn’s family had planned to visit Jayla, her older sister, all the way in Minnesota. It was a quick break from the noise of school and the drama she had started leaving behind. Minnesota was peaceful. She got to laugh with her sister, breathe air that didn’t feel heavy, and exist outside of her usual world for a while.

But while Jordyn was gone, things went down.

Tara texted her in a long paragraph, saying there was drama—some girls had been coming at her sideways, throwing slick comments, making her feel like they were trying to punk her in front of other people. The names weren’t new—girls who’d never liked Jordyn much anyway.

Jordyn felt that fire in her chest as she read the messages. That wasn’t just her friend, that was her **best** friend, and nobody messed with her people. When she got back, she told Tara straight up:

“If they try it again, we’re both handling it.”

Tara nodded. “Bet.”

But when Jordyn came back ready, the energy shifted. The girls didn’t want the smoke. No words. No actions. They avoided eye contact like guilt had them frozen. Jordyn and Tara let it slide, but the message had been sent—*we’re not the ones to play with.*

That same week, Mel invited Jordyn to hang out after school. Nothing wild, just a chill vibe. But what caught Jordyn off guard was the new energy Mel brought with her—*new faces*. One in particular stood out.

Taniah.

She was 17, turning 18, and carried herself like she already knew the world. Her confidence was magnetic, and her eyes had this way of locking onto Jordyn like they could see straight through her walls.

At first, it was just casual.

They'd all hang out, laugh, talk late into the night. But over time, Taniah and Jordyn started drifting toward each other more and more. Shared secrets. Lingering glances. Taniah never made Jordyn feel young or out of place—just seen. Fully, clearly, and intentionally.

Jordyn was cautious at first. She had been here before—*almosts* and *maybes* and people who didn't know how to hold her. But Taniah was different. The age gap didn't seem to phase her. She wasn't playing games. And when she looked at Jordyn, it wasn't with pity—it was with something real.

By the end of September, it was official.

Jordyn and Taniah were together.

And this time, it felt different. Deeper.

Since Jordyn and Tara were locked in as best friends, it only made sense to bring them together. At first, Jordyn worried it might be weird, but it clicked instantly. The three of them turned into their own little circle—sharing everything, protecting each other, laughing through the chaos.

But peace doesn't last forever.

It wasn't long before **Taniah's ex** found out about the relationship. And she wasn't happy. Rumors started floating. Attitudes started shifting. People started watching Jordyn again, this time with whispers and side-eyes that felt familiar.

But Jordyn didn't care.

She finally had people who *chose* her. And for the first time in a long time, she was choosing herself too.

Chapter 5: The Fall

As *soon* as Jordyn started to feel like her life was finally coming together—*BOOM*.

Life reminded her just how fast it could fall apart.

It was a regular evening. Jordyn had just finished laughing on FaceTime with Tara and Taniah. Things were light. Easy. She was finally in a space where her heart didn't feel so heavy.

Then her dad walked in.

His eyes told the story before his mouth ever opened. Jaliyah was sitting on the couch next to Jordyn when he said it.

“They found Aunt Jay in the house.”

Just like that.

No warning. No time to process.

Jordyn's world stopped.

Her breath caught in her chest, and she dropped to the floor like her knees couldn’t carry the weight of those words. Her scream cracked through the quiet living room, and then came the sobbing. Loud, uncontrollable sobbing that shook her whole body.

She couldn’t think. Couldn’t breathe.

Her chest tightened—panic. She was spiraling, and she couldn’t stop it.

Jaliyah tried to hold her, but Jordyn pushed her away and ran straight to her room. She slammed the door, turned off her phone, and curled into her bed, wishing she could disappear.

She didn’t eat.

She didn’t sleep.

She didn’t talk.

For the entire week, Jordyn stayed home from school. No calls. No texts. Not even Tara or Taniah could get through to her. Everyone who loved her just had to wait outside the storm, hoping she’d come back from it.

Aunt Jay was *everything*. She wasn’t just an aunt—she was the one who understood Jordyn on a level most people didn’t. She gave the best advice, always had Jordyn's back, and knew how to bring light into any room. Losing her felt like losing the last safe piece of childhood Jordyn had left.

When the family finally went to Aunt Jay’s house, Jordyn thought she could handle it.

She couldn’t.

She sat in the car outside, looking at the front door. Her chest started tightening again, and before anyone could say a word, tears started rolling down her face.

“I can’t go in,” she whispered.

Nobody forced her. She stayed in the car, crying so hard she couldn’t breathe. It felt like she was drowning in her grief. Like the house itself knew she didn’t belong in it without Aunt Jay there.

And then came the viewing.

The funeral home smelled like flowers and sadness. Jordyn stood outside the door, staring at the sign with her aunt's name on it. Her body felt frozen. Every step forward felt like a mile. But when she finally walked in and saw the casket, she broke all over again.

She didn't even make it all the way down the aisle.

She collapsed into her mom's arms, crying like she hadn't cried in years. The kind of cry that lxaves you empty.

But after that… something inside her shifted.

The sadness started turning into **anger**.

Jordyn started snapping at people—her parents, her siblings, even Tara. It was like her fuse had burned out. Everything annoyed her. Everything made her mad. She couldn't understand why the world just kept taking the people she loved.

And when the tears didn't come, the numbness did.

That's when the drinking started.

She didn't care anymore. She started sneaking drinks—at parties, at home, sometimes even just to fall asleep. It was easier than facing everything she was feeling. It helped her feel nothing. And nothing felt better than the pain.

People started to notice. The ones who cared tried to say something.

"You good?"
"Jordyn, you've been different."
"You need to talk to somebody."

But Jordyn didn't want to talk.

She wanted to forget.

She was spinning, and she knew it. But part of her didn't even want to stop. Because grief didn't just break her—it changed her.

And she wasn't sure if she could ever go back to who she was before.

Hayden Rhodes

Disquiet

“Satanized”

My eyes snap open to screaming and rushing bodies that are all around me. I lay on the hard floor of the gymnasium in my high school, my head pounding with pain. What happened? I had to have blacked out, the last thing I remember is one of the older kids in my class pushing at me, calling me names, telling me I was worthless and they didn’t want me on their team anymore.

I was mad I admit, but I am not strong enough to go up against those jock football players who feel they own this school just because they won state again this year. I am just that weird, punk kid that dresses in all black, keeps to themselves, and avoids contact from others.

A pool of thick scarlet red lays in front of me. Is it my blood? No. I see the culprit next to the puddle, and he is not moving. Scratches line his face and arms, deep enough to appear as a lion rampaged through this room and attacked him. I startled realizing there was blood on my hands, and only on my hands. Did I do this?

No. I did. A deep, dark voice sounded in my mind. That jerk was bullying you. I just gave you the tool to fight back.

I shot up like a rocket, glancing around the room to see if anyone else heard the confession or if it was just me. Taking note of the lack of bodies in the room. One of my classmates, a girl, is curled up in the fetal position on the back wall. A teacher tries to console her.

It was just you Tobi. I am part of you now. He spoke again, sending shivers down my spine.

“NO! NO! NO!” I scream tearing my fingers at my skull. “Get out! Get out! I don’t want this!! I’m fine!”

You’re not. You’re far from fine Tobi. You’re weak, that’s why I chose you. His maniacal laugh echoes through the caverns of my mind. This was the moment I knew my life would never be the same again.

***

I sit in the reception room with my mother, waiting for my name to be called back to speak with yet another doctor about my condition. Magazine pages turn abruptly as my mom’s anxiety skyrockets again over what will be determined for me. I sit quiet staring at the wall, stealing occasional glances at other patients sitting near me.

Grey walls surround us. Such a dull color, but I guess this place being what it is, grey is boring, calm, soothing. I sigh, resisting the urge to fidget and draw attention to myself. We’ve been here for thirty minutes already, and the wait doesn’t seem like it will be ending anytime soon. Popping gum diverts my

attention to the girl sitting behind the computer at the front desk. She is clearly as bored as we are, pretending to be working but I know she's glancing at her phone to check if the time has ticked away enough for her to go home.

"Tobi Crawford." A petite lady with short cropped black hair calls as she opens the door to the back. I groan, slowly rising from my chair with my mother to meet this new "world renowned" doctor.

We walk down a short hallway and are led to an exam room, painted the same boring grey as the rest of the office. I roll my eyes and make my way to the paper covered table; it crinkles as perch myself on top. The nurse takes my vitals, says they are normal and lets us know Dr. Hatfield will be in shortly.

"Don't look so grim Tobi." Mom tells me. "Dr. Hatfield is supposed the be the best neurologist in the country. He will find a way to help your seizures."

Doubtful. The voice inside casually says. I wince, and try to ignore him.

I half smile at her, "Whatever you say, ma."

She grabs my hand, "Don't let what happened in gym class get to you. We will figure out how to get this under control."

Gym class. I sigh at the memory. Recalling all the blood in the room, the piercing cries, the chaos of it all, and how Jake almost died that day because of me. I was about to get lost in the depths of it as my attention is drawn to the door.

A tall grey-haired man with a bushy grey mustache, and thick bifocal glasses walks in. He is holding my chart in his left hand, studying the material inside. He reaches into his white lab coat and pulls out a pen and sits it down on the desk and plants himself on a stool beside it.

He clears his throat like he has the biggest hairball stuck in there, and then smiles, though it is not warm. "Tobi, nice to meet you. I am Dr. Hatfield. Mrs. Crawford it's a pleasure to have you both here with us today." His gaze slowly looks me up and down, taking me in. I know my appearance isn't the most presentable. Mother had yelled at me to wear something other than jeans and a baggy black sweatshirt. I did at least comb my unruly hair, so that counts for something. "So, it appears you've been having issues with seizures."

"Way to state the obvious, doc." I retort. He's supposed to be the best in the country, huh?

My mom's hand swats at my leg, "Be nice!" She hisses to me. "Yes, doctor. We were hoping you could help." Her tone now softer. Oh sure, she's nice to him.

"Well from the looks of it, the medications haven't helped and there is no known cause of what triggers them. When was your last one, son?"

My mother starts to answer, “He was in---”

She is quickly cut off. “You’ll have your turn Mrs. Crawford. I want to get the boy’s account first.” Dr. Hatfield interjects.

I swallow thickly, about to speak. *You don’t have to tell them.* The voice in my head says. I cringe. I hate when it talks to me. The seizures I am granted before he takes over stripping me of any sense of control are bad enough, but the eerie voice is like bugs crawling on my skin sending a shiver down my spine. It takes all of my concentration to not react, to reveal my inner turmoil.

Why don’t you cause a scene instead? Maybe take those papers and throw them across the room? Or even take that pen and stab the doctor right in his privileged hand! I shut my eyes as if that would block out the voice. I don’t want to hurt anyone no matter how much this thing insists I should. I quickly pull out of my thoughts, realizing am being watched and need to cooperate.

Dr. Hatfield sees my hesitation, “Is there something else going on with you that you haven’t shared with any medical professional?”

Yes, there is, of course there is. But I cannot tell him that there is something inside me, and I don’t think there is a cure. Some swirling, evil vortex waiting to swallow me whole, spinning me around in a whirlwind of confusion. Something that is twisted and downright harmful. Harmful not only to myself, but to others around me. I think I know what this sinister thing is inside of me, but I am afraid what will happen if I am right.

I shake my head in answer, not wanting to divulge the information that I have a voice that always tries to persuade me to do bad things and then when I refuse, I get a seizure. Nope, adding schizophrenia to my medical history isn’t something I want to do.

The doctor studies me, his eyes harden, taking me in like a predator about to pounce on prey. He scribbles a few words in my chart and looks to my mother. Without waiting on me to answer his first question, he changes the subject. “I see the other doctors haven’t prescribed an MRI yet to check brain function. I would like to get one of these as soon as possible. Give me a moment and I will go see if we can work Tobi in for one today.”

You are not getting in that machine. The voice barks at me, anger lacing its tone. I know my skin pales; I feel the blood quickly drain from my face. The doctor eyes me, taking note, and strolls out of the room.

“What is wrong with you today?” My mother hisses, snapping my attention in her direction. “You’ve barely said a word, and you look as white as a ghost. I hope this image gives us some answers. I miss my sweet boy.” Her eyes fill with sadness, tears threating to breech the dam. It pulls at my heart seeing her like this and knowing it is because of me and the inner turmoil I am going through.

I sit in silence staring at that ugly grey wall, the color reminding me of this cloud I have hanging over my head. I do miss being her sweet boy, I won't deny that. I miss the days when I felt in control of my body. The days where I could bask in the sun versus drowning in a tempestuous sea. The days when silence wrapped me in a comforting blanket. All I hear now is that storm that is raging inside me, tempting me to the dark side where I know I don't belong.

The door of the room cracks open, the same black-haired girl pops in to let us know that they made an appointment over at the hospital for me to get my scan. Mom grasps my hand and leads me to this next phase of treatment.

An hour later I am donned in a pale green hospital gown and the contrast is pumped into my veins. It's only me and the tech, Alan, here in the room. Mom was informed she had to wait outside in the waiting area, which didn't fare well as she doesn't want me out of her sight.

'I know you're nervous, but it will be okay." Alan assures me smiling warmly. He has the type of bedside manner you'd expect from someone in medicine. Calming and soothing, like a friend. "The contrast will make you feel like you have to go to the bathroom, that is normal and should go away within a few minutes." He motions for me to lay back on the table by patting the plastic covered pillow.

I laugh, "Has anyone actually peed in the machine?" I know it's a silly question, but I am trying to lighten the mood for myself. Trying not to think about the inner being and what may happen in this very room if he rears his ugly head.

"It's happened a few times, but if it does, don't be embarrassed. We are ready for it." He gives an assuring nod. "This will take a few minutes, if you get anxious, breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Try to focus on anything that makes you happy. Don't let claustrophobia set in, and it is important to try and be as still as possible." He hands me some buds to place in my ears. "The machine is noisy; this will help drown out the sound." I nod in response as I place the buds in my ears and Alan straps me down onto the table.

I close my eyes as my body is rolled back into the tube and Alan retreats behind the glass in a separate room to get the scan started. My body tenses and I suppress the urge to move. It will be fine; I assure myself taking a deep calming breath. I am nervous because earlier the voice was adamant that I was not getting this scan. Please God, let him behave I silently pray.

As soon as the machine starts up, I realize that thought was a lie. This isn't going to be fine at all. My body begins to twitch uncontrollably, a loud screaming in my head tears through my throat and exits into the room. Try as I might, I can't fight it. I can't contain the beast inside threatening to rip me open and escape.

“Hold still please! It is okay Tobi just calm down and breathe.” Alan says calmly to me through the speaker located inside the machine. I don’t know if he can’t hear the scream or if he thinks I am just a patient not able to handle the tight space.

“I can’t.” I grind out through clenched teeth. The hold I have on myself is quickly slipping, draining like water through fingertips. I am not going down without a fight. Sweat beads down my back the more I strain to contain this monster.

LET ME OUT! It screams. I feel it sink its claws deeper into my flesh piercing through my nerves, seeking control. My eyes roll back into my head, swaying to the dominance of the beast inside. Another cry rips though my vocals, the lights in the room flicker on and off continuously, causing the machine to react unfavorably. Lights flash inside, beeps and buzzes go on and off until it eventually shuts down with a hum.

I am stuck, trapped inside my own body as it bends to the will of something otherworldly. It feels as if something is eating my insides as it takes over, paralyzing my every move and bending my body to its will.

“Holy shit.” The tech screams, I hear him inside the booth fumbling with buttons to turn the machine back on and get me out of the tube. “I’m coming Tobi, hold on!” An alarm sounds outside the room, he must be calling for backup.

The room goes eerily dark, except a sinister red glow illuminating the machine my body is contained in, making me feel like I’m trapped in my own coffin. I’m still seizing, trying my hardest to resist the takeover. My body contorts uncomfortably against the restraints. Inhuman sounds are still ripping from my throat. Alan is finally able to get the platform out of the machine having to use his strength since it won’t turn back on.

An entire team sweeps in, throwing the door open in a rush. “What the heck happened?” I hear a frantic female voice ask as she reaches her hand out place on my shoulder to calm me. I snap at her, my jaws working like a rabid dog. Hellish sounds rumbling from my core. I continue to try to break through my own inner restraints, despite this grim fate to overpower this demon inside me.

“Leave him be, Sarah.” Another female voice says, this one is calmer. “We have to let this ride out until he comes back to us. You know how seizures work.”

“You think this is a normal seizure?” I hear Sarah respond. “The sounds he is making isn’t normal!”

I hear Alans voice next, “I have no idea what is going on, this has never happened.” He is frantic as he stands beside me, soft prayers come from him asking God for his hand in calming the situation.

More screams echo through the room from that inky, dark voice. I want to tell the tech to stop, that this being doesn't like God or appreciate being prayed over, and by doing so he is just making the crisis worse. Other staff members join him in prayer as I lay dormant within myself, back arching against the restraints, foam pouring out my mouth. Dark purple and red bruising visible from how much force my limbs are being put through.

An arm rips free through the nylon containing me, and slashes at one of the females at my side, scratching her flesh and making her bleed. She cries out, horror in her wide brown eyes as she looks at me. It's gym class all over again. I can't hurt anyone else. But. I can't help but enjoy the muscularity that I am feeling from this beast inside me.

Somehow, through sheer will, I manage reach deep inside myself and rip the monsters hold out of me, exhausting all the remaining strength I had. My body falls limp, and I pant against the pillow behind my head.

The world spins and whorls as if I am laid flat against a merry go round. There are clouds of white at the edge of my sight blurring the word around me. I see new faces appear over me, the red light from the alarm Alan set still flashing in my peripherals. My body is numb and weary from the energy it expelled from being under the influence of the being. The last thing I see as my vision fades is a wooden rosary cross on a black necklace, bouncing slowly towards me. I pray this is my savior, my salvation to release me from these holds, and then all goes black.

***

I'm awake, but my lids are still heavy with exhaustion. The power that flooded my veins, my entire system, lightly thrumming within me. I have no idea how long I have been out, but my mind slips back to that MRI room and back to the feeling of not only relinquishing control from the being, but also the mass of power he flooded through my body. That taste, that supreme sensation of no longer being weak, is unlike anything I have ever felt before this possession. I craved more of it; my body yearns for it.

I finally pry my lead ridden eyes open, the bright light of the room burning my corneas. My wrist is itchy, I try to scratch it only to realize I am strapped down to another hospital bed, also attached to an IV that's pumping fluids to replenish my fatigued frame. I resist the urge to react, being contained again does not bode well with me, or the monster.

"You're awake." My mother's frail voice says from my left. I crane my neck to look at her, taking in the bleeding mascara underneath her tired, hazel eyes. "They put you in this room to monitor you until you awoke. The MRI was a bust." Her voice cracks like glass as she rubs her fingers along my hand. "What happened in there?" she whispers. "What aren't you telling us?"

I remain silent. The words are on the tip of my tongue, begging to come out, but I can't say them. I can't expose the truth. It scares me what the next step of treatment will be if I do. The truth is, even

though I have this being inside of me, I don't actually hate it. Sometimes when it overpowers me, I relish in it. In the dark power it contains as it courses through my body, even though it takes away my will. It's made me feel untouchable, powerful, strong.

"Tobi," she whispers. "Please talk to me."

"I want to." I respond, my voice weak, raspy from all the screaming. It is if my throat was coated in sandpaper. "But I can't. It. Won't. Let. Me."

"What? What won't let you?" Tears run down her puffy cheeks. I see in her eyes she knows the truth, but she needs me to say it. To admit it. Her grip tightens against my hand. "They say you weren't you in there, that you were possessed, spewing nonsense that no one could understand." Her voice a hushed tone.

I squeeze her delicate hand, her eyes catch mine, holding them in her gaze waiting for the confession. In that moment, I know she sees a glimmer of what's inside. I feel it stirring, dominating, taking over my soul again. "Tobi what is wrong with your eyes? They…they... are so dark and red!" she gasps.

A wicked smile slowly creeps across my lips. She winces as my nails elongate and claw into her hand, but there is nothing I can do to relax my grip. Not when he has all the control, and he wants blood.

"Let go Tobi, you're hurting me." She withes against me. "Tobi, please. I know you're in there. Fight this, let go!" Her voice is frantic, pleading as she pulls to break free. But I can't let go.

"He can't Mrs. Crawford. I am in control now." That same menacing voice in my head echoes though the room, speaking as one through me. "He is mine to behold now. Mine to do as I please."

I see the blood on mother's hand from how deep we penetrate her skin. How pale her skin goes as she crumples to the floor, smacking her head against the side of the bed as she falls. Crimson stains the white tile and the smell of iron surrounds us. The demon laughs maniacally inside me, releasing the reverberation into the world. The blood causing him to be more hysterical than he already is.

I then there's me, stuck again, balancing between what is right and what is wrong. I know this entire situation is wrong, and that I should care more about my poor mother lying motionless on the floor. But in the moment, I am longing for the restrictions on my body to be released to see what other harms we can do together.

A nurse rushes in with a doctor. She attends to my mother as I am watching helplessly through eyes that are no longer mine. I wrestle within myself, severing the bond of evil thoughts taking over my brain. I need to get to my mother to tell her I am sorry for all of this and beg her forgiveness. I also have to try to get *him* to let go of this possession again, but it is no use. He pulls against the confines of our body, seething and speaking words I can't comprehend.

The doctor calls in for backup as I am aggressively shoved down onto the bed by multiple people. A needle is plunged hard into my arm, the static of the injection rolling through my veins warming me as I continue to thrash against the firm grip on my shoulders. My body begins to relax, I realize it was a sedative they gave me, and because of it I am able to regain a small amount of control as the world goes out of focus around me, dragging me into a sleep I did not ask for.

When I awake this next time, there are strong metal shackles holding me against another bed. A chain clinks against it as I move my limbs. The bed beneath me groans on its hinges. This room is different, it's not the same sterile hospital room I was in before. Horror grips me as I realize they have moved me into a dark basement, illuminated by a single dim bulb on a string light that hangs down just in front of my bed. It smells musky, damp. And the worst of it all, I am utterly alone. Just me and my demon in this dark patch of hell that I have been sentenced to.

My chest heaves, the panic is setting in jumpstarting my heart. The machine taking my vitals beeps erratically. Control, I must gain control. Closing my eyes, I try to slow my breathing, and try to release the burning grip on my lungs.

The door across the room squeals as it is pushed open. My eyes widen as I see a priest stroll in, that same rosary hanging down from his neck that I saw as the world vanished from me in the MRI room. His white robes drag the floor giving him a holy, angelic presence. A regal gold sash drapes his front, embellished with white crosses of fine needlework. He also wears a smaller purple sash that just drapes the inside of the gold one. He isn't very tall, but he has a placate aura about him. He has to be my savior. My salvation to get through this cruel joke that I have been subjected to.

"In the name of the father, son, and holy spirit." His rough quiet voice says as he sweeps his hand from his forehead, to sternum, and then to his left shoulder and across to his right. His blue eyes framed with silver glasses search my gaze for the savage living within me.

The beast growls and bares my teeth towards this most unwelcome guest. My stomach churns, I know what's about to happen. I've seen enough horror films on this exact subject. This is an exorcism, and it is the one thing I have been most scared of coming to fruition.

"There will be none of that, child." The priest says. "I'm here to help you. My name is Father Tertullian." He speaks calmly, quietly, as if he is trying to not agitate the demon. I hate to tell him; it is already disturbed and stirring.

The door behind him opens again, and a sliver of light illuminates the space for a fraction of a second as four more adults walk in the room and line up against the wall. The door slams hard against the frame as the last man enters. Two of them are also members of the clergy, dressed in all black with their white clerical collar visible in the dark. The other two are doctors, stoically poised in their white lab coats.

“Before we begin,” Father Tertullian says, “I would like to lead us all in prayer.” Everyone but me bows their head as Father opens his bible and begins to recite scripture and giving thanks to God. As he finishes everyone recites “Amen.”

My body twitches uncontrollably as Father Tertullian strides over to me. He forms a cross in front of his heavenly frame again. He pulls out some strong-smelling oils, pooling a bit into his palm and blows it in my face. I flinch, the demon roars. My skin immediately begins to burn and bubble. Steam rises in the air, “*Get away from me!!!”* the demons voice seethes as it once again takes over my own.

Father ignores him, he raises his right hand and recites the Lord’s Prayer. The two other priests echo in unison behind him. I feel the divine power in the air, wrapping around my limbs, pulling at the unholy monster within. His claws clutch deeper, resisting the pull. His inhuman strength pressing hard against our shackles. *“I will not give him up!”* he snarls in a fit of rage.

I am lost in this battle. A boat battered against the tides. The pull of salvation on one end, and devastation at the other. I fear the devastation is going to take over. I’m disappearing more and more as the prayers go on. The grip on my own life slipping through the cracks, as I am swallowed by the harsh darkness within. I want to cry out, to do anything to let them know I am still here, but I am lost and fear I will never be found.

Both the doctors race to the bedside, landing their hands upon our shoulders as the first set of shackles break free from the bed, causing it to rock into the wall breaking some of the bricks due to the amount of force that was exerted to break free. The power of the monster within is remarkable, no mortal would be able to do what we’ve just done. The hands forcefully slam us back onto the bed, but they struggle against our might.

Chanting continues, a new prayer in Latin begins. Father is now reading from the book of exorcism. His voice is the loudest, but the other priests’ voices project across the room, bouncing off the thick walls. Holy water douses our body melodically with the prayer. We thrash, we bite, we roar. The single light in the room blinks in and out of existence.

A slight pinch is felt against our arm, another sedative to get us under control. But this time, we are stronger. This time we will not succumb to the wicked medicine.

I give in. I let the demon have me completely. I know I shouldn’t have, but there’s no fighting it anymore. I feel his raw power radiating throughout the room, devouring the holy aura that’s surrounds us, setting fire to the sheets we sit upon. Father Tertullian’s face bleaches, matching his robes. “Oh, God. This one is strong!” He screams as the doctors are both shoved to the floor as we break the remaining chains containing us.

Chaos has erupted and we savor it, lapping it up like a delicious meal. High pitched screams fill the hall outside the basement as the two other priests flee for more help. Father Tertullian is still praying

over us, still anointing us with his precious holy water in hopes his ritual work. We approach Father, his eyes bulging with a mix of disbelief and fear as our strong arm sweeps him across the room. His head cracks against the bricks, and then his body lay flaccid on the floor. I feel a rush of satisfaction scattering through our blood.

A miniscule part of me feels bad for not being able to quell this being and for hurting these people, especially Father. All he wanted to do was rid the world of this evil inside, and what did I do? I unleashed it. I quit battling, finally giving into the sinister call, to the wrath inside me wanting to unleash hell upon earth. No longer will I be that sweet boy my mother longs to have. No longer will I be bullied and picked on. No longer will I be held back by what's inside me. We are one now, he may be in control, but I have a taste of this power coursing through my veins. And you know what, it feels damn good.

Maybe in time I will learn how to fight back and reclaim my body. But for now, I will let the demon do its worst, and I will revel in the feel of his immense power as he smothers the world in darkness. Just as he did with me.

Lauren Corbett

“Eyes Up”

And… done. Finally.

Brooke closed her laptop and slumped back in her chair with a groan.

Two weeks ago, she’d been given a research paper to write. She knew she should’ve at least drummed up a shoddy rough draft the week it was assigned, but… God, she’d been so busy since then. Between going to her sister Eloise’s baby shower, visiting Gran at the hospital, and checking in on her parents at home, she’d simply forgotten about it.

As she was, she was only *just* keeping her grades decent.

That paper she’d almost let slip through her fingers had been a hefty one, and she’d been lucky to remember it just a day after the deadline. If there were other things she still hadn’t done… other things she’d simply let *slip away* amongst the tide of her life…

Dread coiled low in her stomach and Brooke rubbed a weary hand down her face. She let out a slow breath. *Whatever*, she decided. *That* would be a problem for *Future*-Brooklyn. Continuing to work later into the night would be like throwing twigs at a stone wall—pointless, and a little pathetic.

Current-Brooklyn needed sleep. Desperately.

Brooke leaned back in her chair, craning her neck a bit to look over at her dresser.

She’d opted to work by dim lamplight, instead of the harsh light of her overhead fan. It wasn’t great for her, visibility-wise, but using bright lights when it was so dark outside always felt wrong. Like some messed-up dichotomy between the pitch-black darkness just beyond her closed curtains, and the cold, artificial lighting of the indoors.

Brooke narrowed her eyes. Sitting innocently on her dresser, bleeding through the barely-there light of her room, *3:45 AM* blinked back at her in ugly red letters from her digital clock.

She knew it was late. Seeing it again didn’t make it any better.

She had class tomorrow morning, and here she was—awake. The professor teaching her first class of the day—Martin Hargrove—was not known to tolerate tardiness. Or questions. Or college students in general.

Professor Hargrove’s class started at eight o’clock.

3:45 AM.

“I hate you,” she said.

3:46 AM, blinked the clock. You stupid girl.

Brooke groaned, slumping forward and letting her forehead hit her desk with a hearty *thunk*. Why had she decided to do college again? Papa hadn't. Mom had, but Mom was Mom, so of course she had. They both had saved up so much money for her and Eloise to even *go* to college in the first place, so Brooke *had* to try, just for their sake.

After a moment, she pushed her chair back from her desk and stood up. She eyed her closed door for a long moment, before shrugging and collapsing into her bed. She wrestled her blanket out from where it had fallen between the wall and her bed, and pulled it over herself, sighing.

She could brush her teeth tomorrow morning.

All she wanted to do now was sleep.

Brooke groped blindly toward her nightstand. When her hand slapped against the base of her lamp, the light turned off, and her room went dark.

////

Papa and Eloise found sleep to be a simple task.

To them, it was as straightforward as laying down, getting comfy, and letting their eyes slip shut—then they were on their way to sleepy-town within minutes. Eloise was a very light sleeper, so she was never down for long, but Papa? When Papa was out, he was *out.* Nothing but a hurricane, Mom screaming like a banshee in his ear, or a bucket of cruel, ice-cold water would wake him from his slumber.

Brooke, however, did not fall asleep so easily.

She had to lie there, for what felt like hours on end, and *wait*. It was only herself, her thoughts, and the backs of her closed eyelids. Whenever Brook did manage to doze off, it often felt like she'd never slept at all when she opened her eyes the next morning. Like she had fallen asleep only *moments* before she'd had to properly wake up for the next day.

It was all the worse when her sleep was interrupted. Eloise had learned to open their door cautiously when they were growing up, especially when they still shared a room. Brooke was unforgiving toward those who woke her up early, especially on the weekends. Extenuating circumstances aside, she had no reason to be up before ten.

It was torture, but it was life. Brooke dealt with it.

She'd only just managed to fall asleep, when the screechy tones of an emergency alert bellowed out from her phone. She was fully awake in an instant, as if she'd had a bucket of cold water poured over her, and her heart throbbed violently in her chest. Any progress she had made toward proper rest that

night was ripped away from her, and—even having only just woken—Brooke felt like punting her phone out her window.

Jesus Christ, she thought. I hate these things.

The emergency alert died down for only a moment, before starting back up again with renewed, agonizing gusto. Her phone cried and buzzed urgently on her nightstand. If she left the stupid thing as is, it wouldn't be long before it vibrated its way off the table entirely. Brooke raised herself onto an elbow and reached out for the device, grumbling.

As soon as she felt it, she threw aside its charging cord and pulled it to her.

She squinted as her phone lit up in her hand. The screen was almost blinding in the pitch-darkness of her room—so fierce she couldn't help but squint in pain and avert her gaze. Just until her eyes could adjust, and reading the alert would hurt less.

Or, Brooke thought, casting her eyes over to her nightstand. *I could do this instead.*

Shifting, Brooke reached out to turn on her lamp. The room flooded with light and her lips pressed into a thin line as her vision scrambled to keep up. She settled back into the soft comfort of her bed, pulling her blankets back up around her shoulders, and it wasn't long until she could see again.

The last time Brooke had been woken by an emergency alert, it'd been for a severe thunderstorm. She didn't keep up with the news or check the weather app for more than a quick glance at the week's forecast, so—admittedly—it had caught her off-guard. Thankfully, her apartment's power hadn't been out for long, so it hadn't impacted her much, but she could've been in a pickle if it had gone on much longer.

Since then, she'd kept a closer eye on the weather. It had come in handy, and she'd been able to prepare for most of the poor weather she'd caught wind of ahead of time. Non-perishable food, bottled water, and emergency water for toilet flushing purposes—anything and everything she'd need.

This was apparently the end of that streak.

The emergency alert had died out not too long ago, just like they always did. Even in the worst of these situations—like that tornado warning she'd gotten to weather out a few months back—she never felt like she was in true danger. She supposed she could've just been lucky, up until this point, but… she didn't know.

Regardless, she had to check. It would be stupid to ignore an emergency alert.

Brooke looked down at her phone, tapping the screen to bring it to life again.

The alert was front and center in her notifications, enlarging to fill her phone's display as soon as she opened the device. Even if she was trying to ignore it, it'd be hard to do so. A gray box filled half the screen, plain and assuming—except for the bold black header and the tiny yellow warning sign beside it.

EMERGENCY ALERT
DO NOT, UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES, LOOK AT THE MOON.
Further instructions may or may not follow.
Stay indoors. Stay safe. Use lethal force against hostiles.
Await official communication.

A coworker of mine looked. She's now trying to break into the room I'm in. She's—a zombie? Mind-controlled? They aren't safe. They don't seem to think.

Please, God, if you come under attack, don't hesitate to dehffohads--

Brooke blinked. *What?*

Unease stirred, thick and heavy, in the pit of her stomach. Slowly, she pushed herself fully upright.

"Don't look at the moon?" she whispered. "A zombie?"

Her eyes wandered to her closed curtains. They were blackout drapes, and had been made from a material heavy enough that she'd had to get some outside help to hang them up. They kept her room nice and dark when drawn shut, even during daylight hours.

What would happen if she looked behind them? *Why* couldn't she look at the moon? She wouldn't seriously turn into a zombie, would she? Brooke wasn't one to discount government emergency messages, but this? This was a bit absurd.

More strangely, why had the message ended like that?

It was almost like… she shuddered to think it, but it was almost like the person writing it had been slammed into their keyboard before they could finish typing it all. That was an uncomfortable thought.

Should she take it seriously? Brooke let her legs fall off the side of her bed, and braced herself at the edge of it. It *was* an emergency alert—or at least appeared to be one—so the rest of her dormitory must have been woken by it as well. She wasn't close with any of her neighbors, but… she'd rather be safe than sorry.

There was someone directly opposite to her dorm room. She'd go and check in with them. See what *they* think about the situation. Maybe—maybe they'd know what to do.

Brooke threw aside her bed covers and slipped out of her bed, shoving her phone behind the waistband of her pants. She shuffled over to her dresser to pull on a pair of socks—the floor was freezing on her bare feet—and crept over to the door. There would be a window on the left side of the kitchen-living room, but she was certain she'd closed it the previous day before retreating to her room for the night.

Brooke eased the door open, and peered into the room. It was completely dark. All she could hear was the quiet hum of the refrigerator, and the creaking of the building around her. They were all typical noises, yet somehow—somehow they only made her more anxious. Shivering, Brooke padded silently across the living room, and stopped in front of her front door. Behind it was the hallway that interconnected all the student dorm rooms.

Brooke leaned in and pressed her ear to the door. She forced herself to stay still, ears straining for even the slightest of sounds beyond her dorm room. Her breaths were shallow in her chest, and her muscles were tense with apprehension.

There was nothing.

No footsteps, no voices, no noises.

Nothing.

That wasn't unusual for how late it was. Or… how early? Brooke didn't know what time it was, and she didn't feel like pulling out her phone to check. She'd probably glanced over the time when she'd first woken up, but had been too distracted by the strange emergency alert to properly register it. Regardless, if everyone was in her situation right now, they'd most likely be just waking up, too. If anything, she'd step out into the hallway and see one of her neighbors stepping out as well.

Brooke breathed deeply, and pushed the door open. She'd be fine.

Outside, the hallway stretched out before her, silent and empty under harsh fluorescent lighting. It was eerie, being out at such a late hour. The lights were dimmed, somewhat, for the nighttime, but the lack of visibility didn't make the area any less disturbing to stand in.

Brooke stepped over the threshold, and left her door open behind her. She felt like her heart was crawling up her throat. Like her stomach was doing nauseating loop-de-loops, and threatening to take her dinner away with it.

She didn't know why she was so nervous about this. It wasn't like there was *screaming* or any other concerning noises coming from the building.

Stay indoors, the emergency alert had ordered. *Stay* safe.

She tightened her arms around her and crossed the hall. She drew to a stop before the door opposite to her own, brows furrowing in concern. Her fingers tapped an anxious beat against her arms. *Technically,* she thought, *I'm still indoors.*

She eyed the small metal plaque on the white door. *Room 203*.

She didn't make a habit of speaking with her neighbors, but she thought this room housed a girl around her age. Maybe a year or two younger. Brooke was certain she hadn't been in the room the year before, at the very least.

Brooke breathed in deeply and rolled her shoulders back. She rapped lightly on the door.

"Hello?" she called. "Anybody there?"

Annabelle Kirkland

“Vanishing Point, Chapter 1: The Beginning”

The mansion was alive with energy, almost as if it thrived on the buzz of its guests. It wasn’t eerie, despite its glory and history. Instead, it welcomed everyone with warmth, chandeliers casting golden light across polished wooden floors, the smell of fresh flowers arranged in crystal vases fused with the scent of wine and hors d'oeuvres. Each room seemed to hum with life, as though the walls absorbed laughter and chatter. Rya Lewis had never been in a place quite like this. She’d joined the murder mystery dinner at a friend's invitation, but the mansion's charm had drawn her in more than the game. The mansion had its spiral staircases, hidden corridors, and antique décor. It was the kind of place that inspired stories, stories Rya would never get the chance to write.

As the crowd gathered in the dining hall, Rya’s curiosity led her to slip away unnoticed. The boiler room caught her attention, not because it was particularly remarkable, but because it was quiet. The hum of the party faded as she descended the stairs. The air was damp and smelled faintly of metal and earth. Pipes rattled softly as the boiler hissed in rhythm. She walked slowly, her fingers brushing against the cold stone walls. Something about the space felt... off. But before she could place the feeling, the mansion seemed to shift. A faint vibration hummed beneath her feet. The overhead lights flickered once, twice, and then steadied as if the house had drawn a sharp breath. And then, in an instant, Rya was gone.

RYA

Rya’s eyes fluttered open to a light that wasn’t light, a glow that surrounded her yet cast no shadows. Her body felt weightless, suspended in a space that wasn’t quite a room. She took a shaky breath, though she wasn’t sure she needed to. And then she noticed the other presence.

“You felt it, didn’t you?” said a voice behind her.

Rya turned to see a striking woman in a crimson dress that seemed to shimmer with its light. Her dark skin radiated a glow of its own “My name is Lexi” her gaze steady but not unkind.

“What are you talking about? Where am I? What is this?” Rya asked, her voice trembling.

Lexi stepped closer, tilting her head as if evaluating Rya. “You’re in the in-between, love. Dead, but not gone. And this mansion, well, it has its way of… marking the occasion.”

KAMRYN

On the other side of the mansion, Detective Kamryn Hart was on the porch when it happened. She wasn’t at the party to work; this was supposed to be a rare evening off. The invitation had come from an old friend, and Kamryn had reluctantly accepted. But Kamryn had a knack for being in the wrong place at the right time and tonight would be no exception.

Standing there, she projected a quiet intensity, sharp-eyed, with a state of awareness that clung to her even on nights like these when she tried to forget work. Her dark curls were pulled into a loose ponytail, a few strands escaping to frame her face. A deep scar traced along her knuckle, a souvenir from a case long past. Her leather jacket, torn but sturdy, was pulled tightly around her as she took in the crisp air. The laughter and music spilling from the mansion behind her felt almost surreal against the calm night. Her mind never truly rested. Even here, in the safety of an upscale gathering, her thoughts drifted, watching the exits. She wasn't sure if the habit was caution or paranoia, but it had kept her alive. Then, the distant sound of bickering inside caught her ear. With a sigh, Kamryn returned to the mansion.

Inside, a woman's laugh rose above the hum of conversation, pulling Kamryn's attention. The woman stood near the grand piano, her bright eyes and golden hoop earrings caught the light. Her energy was magnetic, her smile unguarded. It was the kind of presence that could light up even the coldest of rooms. Kamryn had met her earlier in the evening during introductions, Lyric was her name. Lyric had teased Kamryn about her serious demeanor, calling her "the untouchable detective," and Kamryn had almost smiled in response. Now, watching Lyric from across the room, Kamryn felt a pull she didn't fully understand.

The moment Rya died, something undetectable passed through the mansion. Lyric paused mid-laugh, her brow furrowing as if she'd felt something, an unease she couldn't name. Kamryn, now inside, thought it too. The faint flicker of the chandelier above drew her gaze upward. The guests didn't notice, continuing their game and conversations, but Kamryn couldn't shake the sense that something had happened. She brushed it off and approached Lyric, who was still looking thoughtful.

"You alright?" Kamryn asked, her voice low but steady.

Lyric met her gaze, her warm demeanor returning. "Yeah, just... weird vibes for a second. Probably all this murder mystery stuff is getting to me." Kamryn nodded, but the flicker of her unease lingered. Something was off, though she couldn't quite name it.

RYA

Rya stood surrounded by the mansion's secrets in the sparkling, in-between glow of the afterlife. Though Lexi remained calm, her words carried weight, settling into Rya like pieces of a puzzle yet to be solved.

"What do you mean the mansion has its way of marking the occasion?" Rya asked, her voice was steadier now. Lexi tilted her head, a slight smile playing on her lips. "It chooses what it reveals and when. And now that you're here, maybe it's ready to show more." Before Rya could respond, more figures emerged like memories long forgotten. First came Ezekiel, with his quiet intensity and piercing eyes, followed by Maya, who swept in with a dramatic flourish and an unbothered smirk.

"New blood?" Maya asked with a wink. "Well, not literally, I suppose."

Rya couldn't help but roll her eyes, though her lips twitched in a faint smile. "I don't understand. Am I supposed to... stay here? What's next?" Ezekiel stepped forward, his voice low but kind. "We don't have all the answers, but we stick together. And we watch. The living can uncover truths, even when they don't realize it." Rya's gaze sharpened as her mind wandered. If she couldn't solve her murder, maybe someone out there could.

KAMRYN

Kamryn stood in the entryway for a minute, her eyes scanning the flickering chandelier and the room. There was something about the mansion, its subtle shifts and eerie quiet in certain corners that seemed alive in a way she couldn't quite explain. Shaking off the feeling, she refocused on the task at hand. Rya's disappearance wasn't just a missing person case anymore; it was unraveling into something much darker.

She moved to the dining hall, where most guests had gathered after the break in the evening's murder mystery game. The air hummed with tension and murmurs, glasses clinking nervously as the guests pretended nothing was wrong. Kamryn scanned the faces carefully, noting expressions, gestures, and whispered conversations. Her sharp gaze landed on Aaron Wright, the host, who was pouring another drink by the grand bar.

"Aaron," Kamryn called, approaching him. "I need a word."

He looked up, his charm intact but his smile slightly forced. "Detective. I hope you're finding this mystery entertaining, at least." Kamryn tilted her head, unimpressed. "I'm not here to be entertained. Tell me more about the break period earlier. How long were the guests free to roam, and did you notice anything unusual?"

Aaron hesitated for a fraction of a second before answering. "The break lasted about thirty minutes. We encouraged guests to explore the mansion and look for clues. Nothing unusual. It was just laughter, footsteps, and the occasional overzealous guest prying open a locked door."

Kamryn took a deep breath. "You mean breaking and entering?" her brows furrowing.

Aaron shrugged. "This place has its secrets, Detective. But I assure you, they're harmless."

Kamryn didn't buy it. She noted the details and turned to Lyric, who was talking on the piano with her quiet and reserved best friend Jade.

Kamryn joined Lyric and her friend; her tone was steady but probing. "Lyric. Jade. Can I ask you both a few more questions about Rya?"

"Of course," Lyric said, her smile unwavering. "Anything to help."

Jade nodded, though her expression remained guarded. Kamryn noted the contrast between the two, a warmth in Lyric's demeanor and a subtle defensiveness in Jade's posture.

"When's the last time either of you saw Rya?" Kamryn asked.

Lyric answered first, gesturing lightly with her glass. "I saw her earlier, near the fireplace in the main hall. She seemed… distracted."

"And you?" Kamryn turned to Jade.

Jade hesitated, her gaze shifting briefly to the floor. "I saw her during the game's first act. She was quiet, keeping to herself."

Kamryn leaned in slightly, her sharp eyes fixed on Jade. "Did she say anything to you? Anything unusual?"

"No," Jade replied quickly, her tone clipped. "I didn't really know her."

Kamryn filed away the subtle tension in Jade's response, her instincts tingling. Something didn't sit right.

As Kamryn moved through the mansion, her thoughts swirling with questions, she found herself drawn to a small library tucked away near the back of the estate. The room was quiet, the scent of old paper mingling with the faint smell of lavender, a scent she'd noticed earlier but couldn't place. She scanned the shelves and furniture, her flashlight sweeping over the ornate decor. Then, she caught a small inconsistency: one bookshelf had scratch marks on the floor beneath it, as if it had been moved recently. Kamryn ran her fingers along the edge of the shelf, testing its weight. It moved easily enough, revealing a hidden compartment behind it. Inside was an old leather-bound diary, its pages yellowed and brittle. She opened it carefully, her breath catching as she read the first few lines:

"To those who find this, know that the mansion holds truths darker than its walls let on. Beware of the ones who smile too brightly. They often hide the deepest wounds."

Kamryn's pulse quickened. The diary seemed to hint at past tragedies tied to the mansion. Kamryn flipped through the fragile pages of the diary, her flashlight illuminating the faded ink. The handwriting was uneven, showing the writer's urgency and fear. The first entry was dated nearly fifty years ago, its author unnamed. She read aloud softly, the words sending a chill down her spine: "This house has seen too many tragedies, but the walls do not forget. They whisper to those who are willing to listen, and they protect those who know their secrets. But beware! What they protect, they also trap. The mansion chooses who stays and who goes."

Kamryn frowned, her finger tracing the page's edge. The next entry, dated two years later, revealed darker secrets: "I hear them at night, the voices that aren't there, the footsteps on floors I know

to be empty. They guide me, but they guide me to truths I wish I didn't know. Beware of the smiling faces. They hide wounds that will never heal." She flipped further, her breath catching as she reached the final entry, written in hurried strokes: "It happened again tonight. The guests laugh, drink, and dance, but none of them see the shadows hiding behind their joy. I pray to leave this place, but I know I never will. If you find this, the mansion will show you what you need to see, but only if you're ready to pay the price."

Kamryn closed the diary slowly, her heartbeat steady but heavy. The warnings hinted at a history of mysterious deaths within the mansion, stories buried beneath layers of charm and hospitality. It seemed the mansion wasn't just the scene of Rya's disappearance; it was an active participant in the unfolding events.

Unbeknownst to Kamryn, Rya and the other spirits were watching her closely from the afterlife's shimmering veil. Lexi's voice was steady as she guided Rya. "Focus on what you want her to notice. She's sharp, but she'll need help." Rya concentrated, her energy manifesting in the smallest of ways. A faint breeze brushed past Kamryn's cheek as she turned a page of the diary. Kamryn frowned slightly, feeling the breeze though she couldn't identify its source.

"It's working," Rya whispered to Lexi.

"She's paying attention," Lexi agreed. "But the mansion has plans of its own. Be patient."

Sazmine Dorsey

"The Hollow Woods"

Samantha had always found a deep sense of comfort in the dense woods that sprawled behind her grandmother's weathered farmhouse, a quaint structure with peeling paint and a sagging porch. The woods were a cherished sanctuary of her childhood, where the dirt paths twisted like a labyrinth, shaped by the eager footsteps of countless adventures. Each gnarled tree, with its knotted branches and bark coated in soft moss, seemed to hold memories, while every rustling leaf carried whispers of secrets shared between only her and the spirits of the forest. But that was before everything changed—before autumn's chill crept in, transforming vibrant green canopies into a tapestry of gold and crimson, and before the world around her began to shift in bewildering ways that left her both enchanted and uneasy. The air now felt charged with an unspoken magic, as if the woods were preparing to unveil mysteries that had long been hidden.

It was a chilly evening in early March when she decided to take one last walk before the sun sank completely on the horizon. The air was thick with the smell of damp earth and decaying leaves, a scent that usually grounded her. Tonight, however, it felt different, almost suffocating. As she stepped deeper

into the woods, the shadows stretched unnaturally, clinging to the trees like darkened hands. Samantha felt the weight of silence pressing in, the usual chorus of chirping crickets and rustling critters replaced by an unsettling stillness. “He-Hello?” she managed to stutter out a sound. Her heart began to race, a steady thump against her ribcage, as she recalled her grandmother’s warnings. “Never wander too far at dusk, child. The night may reveal what the day concealed.”

With a deep breath to dispel the nagging anxiety that clung to her, she forged ahead through the encroaching darkness, her heart set on reaching the magnificent old oak tree that loomed at the center of the forest. This tree, a living relic from a bygone era, had captivated her imagination since childhood with its sprawling, contorted branches that stretched out like skeletal fingers against the night sky, and its gnarled roots that burrowed deep into the earth, as if clinging to forgotten secrets of the past. Yet tonight, an unsettling energy surrounded it, coaching her instincts to bristle with unease. The air was thick with an almost palpable tension, and the shadows that danced around the tree seemed to whisper dark tales of something ancient stirring within its hollowed trunk.

As Samantha finally approached the oak a restless breeze whispered through the atmosphere, stirring the air with an uneasy chill that sent shivers down the spine, causing the branches to creak ominously overhead. She paused, glancing back the way she came, a shiver crawling up her spine. The path was now shrouded in darkness, the familiar landmarks obscured. A chill ran through her—she was no longer alone.

The branches swayed and rustled as if straining to grasp at her, their limbs crackling in the stillness of the forest. From the thicket, a figure began to coalesce, cloaked in darkness that seemed to absorb the fading light around it. Its face remained shrouded, but two menacing horns arched ominously from its brow, framing a silhouette that was disturbingly humanoid yet unmistakably otherworldly. As it stepped forward, the oppressive weight of its gaze pressed down on her, its eyes glinting like shards of obsidian, radiating an insatiable hunger that ignited her primal instincts. Fear coursed through her veins like ice water, and before rational thought could seize hold, she turned on her heel and raced deeper into the woods, her heart pounding violently against her ribs as every nerve screamed for her to escape. The towering trees, once a tranquil refuge for her weary soul, now contorted ominously around her, ensnaring her in a labyrinthine web of shadows and branches. With each hesitant step she took on the damp, leaf-strewn ground, the sound reverberated through the stillness, as if the very forest were a sentient entity, keenly observing her desperate escape. As she dared a fleeting glance over her shoulder, the dark silhouette that had haunted her was no longer visible, yet an unsettling aura lingered in the air—a palpable weight that trailed behind her like a lurking specter. Her heart pounded wildly in her chest, a harsh rhythm that matched the frantic pulse of the night. The moonlight, filtering through the thick canopy above, cast eerie patterns on the forest floor, heightening her senses and deepening her dread.

With determination, she pushed through the thicket, desperately searching for a way out, her breath coming in sharp gasps. The woods transformed into a labyrinth, every familiar path now turning

into a disorienting nightmare. As night wrapped its cold fingers around her, she realized—some doors, once opened, can never truly close.

As she delved further into the dense woods, the air became thick with the scent of damp earth and pine. Suddenly, she stumbles upon a cabin that seems to materialize from a thick veil of swirling gray smoke—an unsettling structure that looks like it was plucked straight from a twisted horror movie or a nightmarish Airbnb for the deranged. Its wooden exterior is weathered and crumbled, with shutters hanging askew and a roof that appears almost caved in from years of neglect.

Despite the eerie atmosphere, Samantha steeled herself and strode toward the door, a glimmer of hope sparking within her. Perhaps she could find shelter there until daylight banishes the shadows of the forest. She reaches the door and grips the cold, rusty handle, feeling a shiver run down her spine as the metal bites against her palm. With a firm twist, she finds it turning but resisting her pull, the door stuck tight against her intrusion.

A sense of dread creeps over her, and an irrational thought flits through her mind: the feeling that unseen eyes are tracking her every move. She glances around, scanning the dimly lit tree line for any sign of a watcher, but the surrounding thicket remains still and silent, cloaked in shadows that seem to stretch and bend at odd angles. The forest holds its breath, leaving her feeling more isolated than ever. She fiddles with the door until it finally swings open. As she peeks inside, a terrible smell rushes toward her, overwhelming her senses. Not knowing what to expect, she takes a deep breath and steps in, convinced that whatever is inside is better than what's outside.

She pushes open the creaking door of the cabin, immediately assaulted by the pungent odor of decay. As she steps inside, her foot unexpectedly makes contact with something on the uneven floor, prompting her to reach down and explore. Her fingers brush against a cold, metallic object—an old flashlight. She turns it on, and the narrow beam of light cuts through the darkness, illuminating dust particles that dance in the air.

With a deep breath, she hesitates before reaching for the light switch on the wall, her heart racing in anticipation. The moment she flips the switch, the overhead lights flicker to life, flooding the space with harsh brightness that momentarily blinds her. As her eyes begin to adjust, shapes slowly take form in the illumination—a tattered sofa, a crooked table, and strange, shadowy outlines against the walls. Suddenly, her breath catches in her throat as the full reality of the room comes into focus.

Marissa Hubbard

"Shadows of the Past, Chapter 2: Forget-Me-Not Tears"

Emma lightly tapped the wooden spoon against the edge of the large, simmering pot filled with creamy loaded potato soup, the savory aroma wafting through the air. As she moved around the kitchen, she carefully arranged an assortment of colorful crackers on the dining table, adding a touch of charm with a small bouquet of fresh parsley as a garnish beside each dish.

After completing the setup, she placed the vibrant pot holders on the table, their fabric bright against the rustic wood.

“Mom, dinner's ready!” Emma called out, her voice filled with anticipation as she heard the familiar squeak of her mother's wheelchair approaching from around the corner. The gentle sound brought a smile to her face as she turned to help her mom maneuver closer to the table. Carefully, Emma guided the chair, ensuring her mom was comfortably settled in her seat.

“How are you feeling?” she asked softly, her eyes filled with concern and affection, ready to share this warm meal and cherished moment together.

“Fine dear, thank you. Just in a bit of pain.”

Gently, she places her hand on her mother's forehead, checking for warmth. "Alright, Mom, let's take a look at what we've got for that," she says softly, her voice filled with concern. Carefully, she supports her mother as they make their way closer to the kitchen table. The aroma of fresh food fills the air, adding a touch of comfort to the moment as they settle down together.

“What did Ryes have to say to you earlier?”

“He just gave me a card with the number on it and told me to get better soon. He wanted me to tell you, though dear, that you could be very important to the case; they are officially closing it as a cold case soon if there aren’t any leads in the next few days.”

“Mom, I-”

“I know, she was close to all of us, but don’t you want to know what happened to your best friend? The case is closing anyway, what do you have to lose?”

“I’m…scared mom.”

“Sweetie,” she pauses for a moment and looks at her with tender love. “She deserves justice. Her family needs answers.”

“What about you?”

She let out a light, melodic laugh before responding, her eyes twinkling with mischief. “You think I can’t handle things on my own? You didn’t come back here just for me; I know I’m not the only reason you’re here.”

Emma sank deeper into her seat, her shoulders slumping slightly as she acknowledged her mother’s insight. The warmth of their small, sunlit living room wrapped around her, but it felt stifling in that moment. A whirlwind of curiosity brewed inside her, yet fear clenched tightly at her heart. She yearned to uncover the secrets swirling around them, but the idea of intruding on law enforcement’s territory made her stomach churn. She didn't want to get caught in the web of suspicion that surrounded the investigation.

After dinner Emma texted Ryes.

Im in

It wasn’t long before she earned a response.

Meet me at -

Guided by her GPS, she navigates the winding roads that twist through the dense forest, the air growing cooler as twilight descends. The soft glow of the device leads her to a rustic bridge, its wooden planks weathered by time and the elements. As the sun dips below the horizon, casting a warm orange hue across the sky, shadows stretch across the landscape. A gentle breeze rustles the leaves above, adding to the enchanting atmosphere as night begins to wrap the world in a silken embrace.

She meets up with Ryes there. “What are we doing here?” She looks around. “I think I found something.” Ryes shows me numerous pictures and letters. Some of them, with Lily in them, dated after her sudden disappearance. “What is all of this?” We continue to look through them to the most recent, which was dated a week ago, it was of Lily tied up half alive, bound to a wood post that looked very familiar.

Suddenly, a rustle catches her attention. She looks up, and there stands a bloody figure on the far side of the bridge, its silhouette dark against the fading light. Without hesitation, she reaches for Ryes handcuffs. Her heart races; this is it. "Police! Stop!" she shouts, her voice ringing firmly through the stillness of the approaching night. The figure hesitates, but she can see the tension in their posture—this confrontation is about to shift. As the suspect's eyes dart around, searching for an escape, she steps forward with authority. "You're not getting away," she declares, inching closer. The figure suddenly sprints for the edge of the bridge, but adrenaline fuels her speed. In a swift movement, she lunges, tackling them to the ground just before they can leap over the railing. With the suspect pinned beneath her, she swiftly cuffs their wrists, her training kicking in. "You're under arrest," she mutters, exhaustion and relief washing over her as she catches her breath. The evening air feels different now, the thrill of the chase finally settling into a calm sense of achievement. Ryes catches up to her as she is putting on handcuffs. “Easy tiger. They didn’t do anything.” He looks at the blood on the man's shirt. “Why do you have blood on your shirt?” The man blinked in confusion, his brow furrowing.

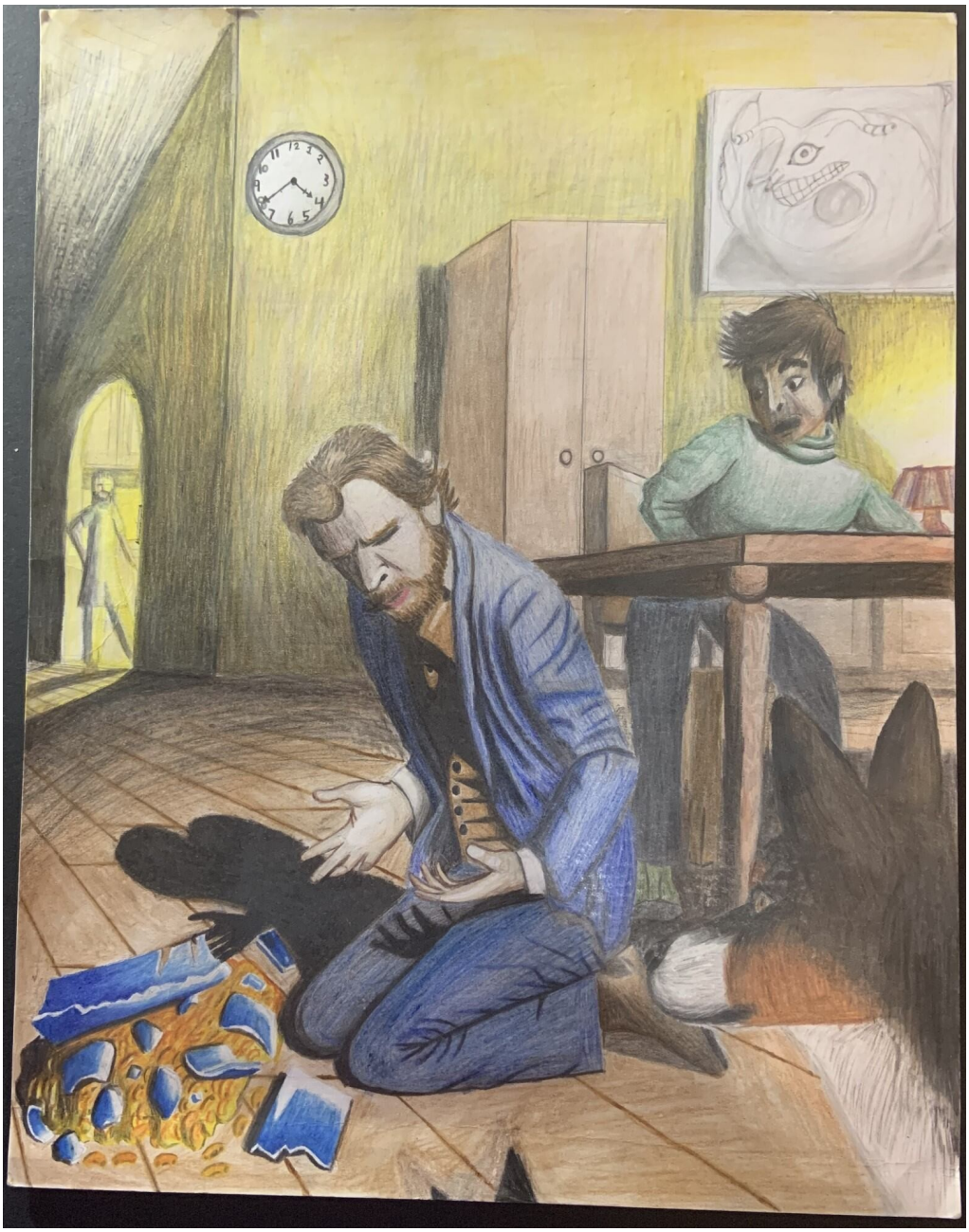
“Blood?” “Yeah, that’s definitely what it looks like.”

“I- I don’t know how it got there. I just woke up a little while ago, and it was all over me,” the man stammered, glancing down at his stained shirt, as if seeing it for the first time.

For a moment, they both stood in silence, weighing the implications of the startling discovery. The tension in the air was palpable as they exchanged glances, realization dawning on them. They needed to collect a blood sample; it might be a long shot, but they couldn’t afford to overlook any potential clue in a situation like this. After a lengthy conversation that felt both urgent and necessary, they obtained the man's hesitant permission to test the blood. It was an uneasy pact, but one they found essential. Days passed as the lab struggled to yield results. The frustration mounted, and the old building’s creaky infrastructure did little to reassure them. With unreliable power boxes buzzing ominously in the background, they could only hope that the delays wouldn’t jeopardize their investigation. Each moment stretched longer than the last, as they awaited answers that felt achingly out of reach.

After a while, the tests confirmed that the blood found belonged to Lily, which gave Ryes enough grounds to arrest him for the disappearances of Lily and Sara. However, Emma was skeptical about it; the poor girl couldn't shake the feeling that it all seemed “too easy” and “too fast.” Nevertheless, the court legally determined that this strange man was responsible since he had blood on his hands... literally. But, dear reader, this was hardly the end of the story—I was just getting started. See you soon... Emma.

-RMG Marissa Hubbard



Challenging Apathy

Walmart

“Minutes to Midnight (Doomsday Clock)”

The clock doesn’t tick
it hums.
Low, electric, constant,
like breath caught in a throat.

> We are not watching it.
> It watches us.
> Each minute shaved is a prayer unanswered,
> each adjustment a warning wrapped in science,
> ignored in the chaos of scrolling.

Ninety seconds now.
But that was yesterday.
Today might be closer,
but no one tells time anymore.
We just feel the heat.
And the rumble.
And the silence afterward.

> It’s not bombs we fear,
> but the slow permission
> we’ve given
> to let everything die
> in the background
> of notifications and denial.

The doomsday clock doesn’t lie.
It just waits.

Zyairh Henry

“Willkommen: How Germany Welcomed in Nazism with the Objectification of Human Life”

“Willkommen, Bienvenue, welcome . . .” sang out the Master of Ceremonies as he stared down the lens of the camera at the start of the film *Cabaret* (00:02:09-00:02:25). By itself, this warm reception might appear to have been given to the fictional audience seated within the titular cabaret and the literal audience viewing the film; when examined in context, though, this greeting takes on a whole new sinister meaning. Before the musical number established the promiscuous nature of the cabaret and even before the Emcee appeared in frame, the ending was immediately foreshadowed by the appearance of two words telling the audience that the film was set in “Berlin, 1933” (*Cabaret* 00:02:04-00:02:08). So, by the time the movie drew to a close, it should have come as no surprise that an altered version of the introductory song was performed in reverse with the debauchery displayed first before a final revelation that the Nazis had infiltrated the audience (02:00:28-02:02:30). One can think of the beginning and ending almost as distorted mirror images of each other, which are reflected in the actual distorted mirror presented in the opening and final close-ups (*Cabaret* 00:00:47-00:02:08, 02:02:00-02:03:30). Together, these scenes with their lyrics and editing reflect how the Germans welcomed in both the Nazis and their sexual revolution by rejecting morality and solely relying on science to inform their worldview. By bringing attention to the folly of the German people, audiences of the film are confronted with the realization that they, the Germans, were normal people who were just as susceptible to dangerous philosophies and deadly ethics as any other generation of any other country.

Of course, such intense statements as those above are not exactly groundbreaking when considering how explicit the film is with its themes. In Terri Gordon’s thorough analysis of *Cabaret,* she very expertly articulated the subtextual implications of the film when she wrote, “On a figurative level, sexual depravity becomes the primary metaphor for political depravity, representing both violent political aggression and the lure of spectacular politics.” This political-sexual connection was apparent throughout the entire film, with the beginning and ending hinting at the idea through the mere proximity the cabaret had to the Nazi regime and then made more clear in the scene that had the Emcee dancing in drag with a line of provocative chorus girls pretending to be gun-wielding soldiers intercut with another scene involving a group of Nazis killing the dog and graffitiing the property of a Jewish lady (*Cabaret* 01:29:40-01:32:03). By presenting those two seemingly unrelated events parallel with each other, the viewers were expected to link the debauchery with the racist hate crime even if it’s unclear exactly how those actions were related. Thankfully, by the end, audiences were given a clue by

1 ("Liza Minnelli").

the Emcee when he asked, “Where are your troubles now? Forgotten . . . We have no troubles here. Here life is beautiful.” (*Cabaret* 02:00:28-02:00:43). Despite what the man on stage said, the literal audience knew that the fictional audience could not escape their troubles, for it followed them into the establishment in the form of Nazis (*Cabaret* 02:02:30). However, the fictional audience didn’t seem to be aware of the danger that they were in because they had “forgotten their troubles” in the wake of the frivolous, sensual show put on by the cabaret girls (*Cabaret* 02:00:28-02:01:31). According to Gordon, this blatant distraction in the film “[suggests] that Weimar culture allowed, through indifference, neglect, or complicity, the development of a politically oppressive regime.”

As a result of these ideas proposed by *Cabaret*, many have questioned the validity of the claim that the Weimar sexual revolution had a hand in the rise of Nazism. Indeed, this question has actually spawned the Kit Kat Club Theory that states that “the Weimar Republic’s relative toleration of sexual diversity amounted to moral nihilism, a revolt against [Christian] moral authority that opened the door for even more immorality, namely, Fascism” (Marhoefer). In other words, the sexual revolution didn’t inadvertently allow the Nazis to take control but was really the final step the German people took in the process of freeing themselves from the figurative chains of religious morality, the standard by which the killing of human life would have been renounced. However, this theory was contested by Marhoefer, who wrote that the Nazis couldn’t be linked with the sexual revolution because, on the one hand, most of the people involved in reforming German laws in favor of sexual liberation did not support Fascism and, on the other hand, the Nazis actively persecuted the sexually liberated, most notably, the homosexuals. The problem with this argument, though, was that it dismissed certain cultural beliefs that would have informed the way the Germans perceived sex and the different races. In fact, the Nazis actually encouraged the study of sex, known as sexology, as long as it remained in this “form [that was] heavily influenced by Nazi racism” (Fenemore). Therefore, it’s safe to conclude that even if the sexual revolution wasn’t the sole reason Nazi ideologies were adopted, it certainly shared some commonalities with Nazism; otherwise, it couldn’t have been grafted into the fascist propaganda.

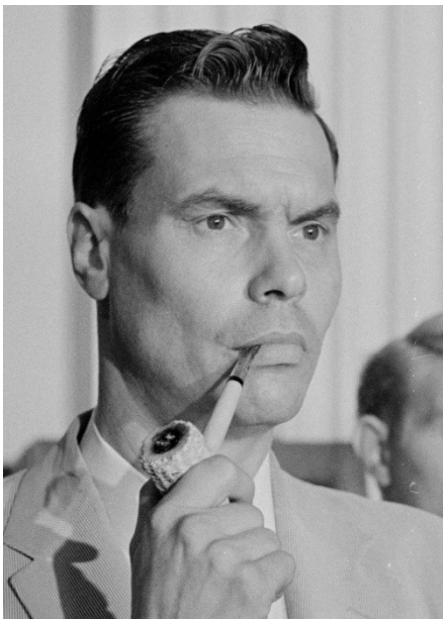
That commonality is science, more specifically, science that was misused. To be clear, science is not inherently evil on its own, but it can be used for evil when paired with dangerous concepts that objectify humanity. For instance, some well-meaning scientists of the Weimar Republic attempted to explain away homosexual desires through certain theories revolving around hormones and the “underdevelopment of sexual differentiation within the glands” (Ramsey). Now, while these theories were intended to dispel social prejudices against the homosexual community, they unfortunately presented a minority to the public at large as mere biological anomalies, unintentionally “othering” the homosexuals even more. (Also, it should be noted that the sexual revolution was not exclusively homosexual; however, participants of other sexual orientations do not seem to have been discussed as much at the time, leaving homosexuality to receive the majority of the scientific theories). So, when the Nazis came along and started using science to objectify other minorities, the German public was already prepared to accept the

idea even though “No evidence has ever been found to support this theory” (Gittelman). The theory in question being Social Darwinism, which “viewed groups, races, nations, and classes as being subject to . . . natural selection,” thus allowing “Jews, Gypsies, Slavs, homosexuals, the mentally ill, and the disabled” to be disposed of as “bacteria” of the population (Gittelman). Of course, with hindsight, it is quite easy to see how these dehumanizing scientific theories led to extremely tragic consequences, but it must not have been obvious to the people at the time; otherwise, they probably would not have fallen so easily for the propaganda.

Indeed, it is with this hindsight that the creators of *Cabaret* likely terrified the original 1970s audiences by pairing swastikas with a demented, provocative version of the welcome song (Gordon, 02:00:50-02:02:30). Doubtless, many conservative adults at the premiere of the film would have associated the portrayal of the Weimar sexual revolution with the revolution they were currently experiencing and fearing possible fascist consequences as a result. Even before the premiere, some people were already attributing pornography to governmental threats, like the Hailsham Youth Leader, Derek Wells (“Youth Leaders Attack Shopkeepers”). This pastor claimed in 1972 that the pornographic magazines displayed in stores could lure unsuspecting children into addiction, causing the children to grow up without a “social conscience and concern for anything much outside his own sexual desires,” which could lead to a “revolution” similar to those of the “Communists” (“Youth Leaders Attack Shopkeepers”). In fact, Wells implies in his interview that the Communists helped instigate their political revolutions by encouraging porn addictions (“Youth Leader Attack Shopkeepers”). In addition to Wells, there was also Patricia Henson, the wife of the actor Basil Henson, who also campaigned against indecent literature in stores a year prior to Wells (“Pat Hits Out”). Mrs. Henson’s major concern, though, was the way in which pornography affected women, turning them into “sex objects” (“Pat Hits Out”). Needless to say, there were probably countless other adults from the 1970s who spoke out against the hyper-erotic nature of the culture who deserve a research paper all on their own; however, Wells and Henson were notable for the ways in which they associated this shift in attitudes with government corruption and human objectification that was specifically targeted at younger generations. So, once *Cabaret* was released, it probably struck a nerve with Wells and Henson and various others like them when they saw or heard about the scene that depicted multiple brainwashed youths enthusiastically singing along to a patriotic Nazi anthem (01:18:15-01:21:20).

2 (“Hitler Given Flowers”)

Whether or not one believes the sexual revolution of the 1970s actually posed a threat, it cannot be denied that the United States of America did have to face a genuine danger only a few years prior to *Cabaret.* In August of 1966, the "American Nazi Leader, George Lincoln Rockwell, was arrested . . . in Chicago . . . where he . . . led demonstrations against . . . Civil Rights Marches" ("U.S. Nazi"). The same Rockwell was later that year arrested again "as he led a [racist] march through the streets of Chicago flanked by supporters wearing sweaters emblazoned with swastikas and 'white power' slogans" ("Rockwell"). This direct opposition to the Civil Rights Movement showed the world that the blight of Hitler's impact had not yet been erased from the Western world, leaving many minority groups, in this case, African Americans, in danger. Thankfully, that threat did not come as a surprise to the black community because "African American publications understood that Nazi racism also targeted people of color" (Hohn). As a matter of fact, as soon as the Nazis gained control, "African American civil rights activists and the black press began to educate their readers about the developments in Germany to highlight and indict the unresolved 'racial question' in the U.S." (Hohn). Furthermore, "as soon as the Roosevelt administration, the American mainstream media, the churches, unions, and civic organizations expressed their outrage over Nazi racial legislation aimed at excluding Jews from German life," the "African American activists and black press pointed out the contradiction between America's democratic ideals and the reality of life for African Americans" (Hohn). So, by the time the Third Reich had been defeated, it was made clear to many that America, the land of the supposed free, had been harboring a nearly identical evil of objectifying human lives that remained prevalent well into the 1960s (Hohn). With this comparison in mind, the looming threat implied in *Cabaret*'s final shots would have been felt by many who wondered if the storm cloud of racism that broke in Germany would break in a similar way for other minorities in America.



3 ("George Lincoln Rockwell")

In short, this musical film was extremely relevant in its day and will continue to be relevant for as long as people are objectified by society through racism or sex. Even if it is a bit unclear as to how the promiscuity and antisemitism relate, if one researches the two topics and reflects on the role these ideas have played in Western history, one can eventually connect the dots. Once those concepts have been fully understood, the introduction and ending can be even more chilling than they were before. Perhaps the Emcee focuses on how the orchestra girls were "beautiful" because that culture only valued human life based on an "objective," materialistic standard like beauty (*Cabaret* 02:00:40)-02:01:30). Either way, the discordant, dissonant notes, the low, twilight-like stage lighting, the slow motion shots that linger on the disheveled showgirls, and the warped looking glass all contributed to the horrifying conclusion that Germany had already let in too many evils, which left them with no choice but to face the consequences

of their actions (*Cabaret* 02:00:40)-02:01:30). So, when the Emcee proclaimed the last words of the entire film, “Auf wiedersehen! A bientot!” before making a brisk bow and exiting the stage, the literal audience are left with the thought that the Emcee might not just be saying goodbye to an era of Germany’s history but also to the many souls who lost their lives in the massacre that was the Holocaust (*Cabaret* 02:01:31-02:01:49).

Josiah Barker

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“The American Dream: Have We Awoken?”

James Truslow Adams, the man who coined the term the American Dream, once said in his book titled *The Epic of America,* “It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.” (Adams 404). Adams’ work, published in the year 1931, was the first literary expression of the iconic phrase that many Americans have grown to strive and achieve throughout many generations. This idealistic vision of society was seen as the next evolutionary leap from its European counterparts. The American Dream, emerging after the United States gained its independence, marked an historic point where many see the developmental shift from the old-world systems. Yet, the changes in the country’s leadership, ideologies, and principles have seen an immense shift since the year of 1931 to the current year of 2025. Ranging across many domestic and foreign issues alike, America and its people and aspirations have grown and transformed as humanity continues to enter a more technological and advanced age. However, one may ponder the question, how exactly has the concept of the American Dream carried over from its more historic origins to a contemporary time? How does the concept of the American Dream differ from that of its original audience to that of the modern American in today’s climate? Through creating a cohesive analysis of the American Dream, we can understand how its perception has evolved throughout America’s development and journey into the 21st century.

Delving deeper into the view of Adams, he asserts further in his work, “No, the American dream that has lured tens of millions of all nations to our shores in the past century has not been a dream of merely material plenty, though that has doubtless counted heavily. It has been much more than that. It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class. And that dream has been realized more fully in actual life here than anywhere else, very imperfectly even among ourselves. It has been a great epic and a great dream. What, now, of the future?” (Adams 405). It is made rather clear that Adams’ view is one of optimistic nature for the future of the American Dream. A dream where millions of immigrants have flocked to try and gain their own slice of freedoms beyond perhaps what was thought possible in the old world. He envisions a type of utopian society where all will possess the equal playing field to pursue what truly inspires them as individuals, no matter the physical, mental, academic, or technical traits that define them. He wonders what will constitute a future where these things can be furthered and established in the qualities of what create the American Dream, he so longs to see come true for all those upon such fresh soil a true dream, and that, in essence, poetically speaks to the view many of his era possessed.

“The American Dream is the promise that the country holds out to the rising generation and to immigrants that hard work and fair play will almost certainly lead to success. All who are willing to strive, to learn, to work hard, to save and invest will have every chance to succeed and to enjoy the fruits of their success in safety, security, and good order.” (Jillson 6). This quote, published in *The American Dream: In History, Politics, and Fiction,* encapsulates further perhaps how many of the foundation-building generations of the United States viewed the subjective and personal nature of the American Dream. The promise of a new world where opportunity lay as far as you were willing to go in many senses of the phrase, to represent all the imaginative prospects of such a quite literal once-in-a-lifetime moment in history, it is no surprise that Americans began to interlace many potential aspirations tied to the concept of a dream. However, this historic viewpoint contrasted with that of the more modern interpretation that follows the overall theme of Cal Jillson’s work, is best summarized by their statement, “Throughout our national history, and even earlier as we shall see, our leaders have lauded the broad promise of American life, what we have come to call “the American Dream,” but dreams have to be embodied in the lives of real people before they have substance and weight. Our dilemma is that while our Americans hearts swell to the idea of the American Dream, we know it was denied to many Americans for most of the nation’s history. So how are we to think about ourselves and our history: with undiluted pride, with deep shame and remorse, or with some complicated and evolving mix of pride, shame, and hope?” (Jillson 1).

Jillson goes on to further express more modern understandings, alongside expressing more modern conclusions, on the actions that occurred during the more crucial developmental years of the United States, elaborating further, “So that is the dream—a shimmering vision of a fruitful country open to all who come, learn, work, save, invest, and play by the rules. The reality, as we all know, has had darker dimensions. The continent’s original inhabitants were slowly but inexorably dispossessed by a rising tide of alien settlement. Of the new arrivals, not all came in any meaningful sense: some were brought, held, and used. Others were barred. Only America’s most fortunate sons and few if any of her daughters were allowed, at least initially, to compete for her accolades and prizes.” (Jillson 6). In similarity to Jillson, other more contemporary writers also express similar understandings of the more modern takeaway and interpretation of the American Dream, although some still cling to a hopeful and prosperous idea.

In an example of a work that falls in agreeance with that of Jillson’s assertions, we examine an article by Adam Chandler, titled, *The Myth of Opportunity Has Broken America.* In this article, Chandler explains in context to providing commentary on President Donald Trump’s second inaugural address, “What’s actually noteworthy about this moment, however, is that there is a rare current of agreement among Americans today. The consensus comes in the form of a deep pessimism about our most cherished national story. One recent poll of American voters conducted by WSJ/NORC found that only 36% still believe in an American Dream broadly defined by the idea that hard work begets success and upward mobility. This finding represents a big tumble downward from 2012 when, even in the shadow of

the Great Recession that cleaned millions of families out, 52% of Americans still held fast to the story of the dream." (Chandler). This article, published in 2025, represents the intense political climate of modern America. The pressures of world events seemingly at an all time high, the United States just as before in other historical events, was at a crossroads of division of policies and solutions that of course is reflected in the concepts of a fading American Dream. The history of mistreatment and discrimination being more widely known and discussed, the economic classes and status growing ever wider between that of the three notable classes of wealth being felt more than prevalently than in times before, these fundamental issues could be speculated to play significant roles in the dwindling enthusiasm surrounding a once idealistic vision. Yet, for some Americans, the dream still at its core, lives.

Americans such as Jeffery McNeil, writing in their piece, *The American Dream Isn't Dead, It's Just Misunderstood,* poses a more positive viewpoint upon the controversial Dream in our contemporary time. He says, "Some people believe the American Dream is dead and the game is rigged against them. That isn't my mindset or attitude. In order to fulfill your dreams, you must aspire to be what you desire. That is the American Dream, to me. And I think some people don't understand what fulfilling that American Dream can take." (McNeil). Following suite to the more classical viewpoint of Adams' perspective, McNeil seems to represent a more positive side that hopes to see a Dream that still thrives, and still lives. Among the public, some may see their interpretation as holding traditional American values as a core fundamental, whilst others would tout the many historic indifferences that perhaps opposed that of idealistic vision that Adams' once proposed, such as individuals like Chandler, or Jillson. As McNeil himself writes in his piece, "Follow your dreams and you will find success in America. It might not be success as you think of it right now. The American Dream isn't about getting rich. It's about living life the way you want to, and that is something we still have the freedom to choose every single day." (McNeil).

For a modern administrative view, Dan Newhouse, Representative for Washington's 4th congressional district, writes in his work, titled, *Revitalizing the American Dream,* about how America's debt could be a leading factor in why many Americans perhaps view the American Dream as having faded. After providing assertions and his own historical perspective as to how perhaps the debt was worsened in recent times, he writes in his closing statement, "America's debt is quite literally mortgaging our children's futures and we must take serious, responsible action before it's too late. I will continue this fight against fiscal insanity to ensure our children can grow up in a strong, prosperous economy where the American Dream can become a reality once more." (Newhouse). While the article itself has sentiments more toward to politic narratives involving promoting their own political agendas, the title of this article as well as the way it appeals to the modern American audience, demonstrates perhaps a rising acknowledgement of the potential fading of a once idealistic dream. For those like Dan Newhouse, by including such powerful words, such as revitalizing, suggests that the American Dream has fallen flat in recent time. While unstated, it is yet inferred that due to factors undiscussed, the American Dream is not the once equal opportunity dream that was perhaps envisioned by the immigrants of whom settled here

and contributed their lives to the greater evolution of a country where true freedom was among one of the highest valued liberties.

In closing, the American Dream, just as many things conceptualized by humans, evolved as we as a species and as a people strive further into an unforeseeable future of uncertainty and differing views of optimism and pessimism. While some may hold the perspective of that of Archibald MacLeish, who once wrote in their work *The American Dream,* “There are those who will say that the liberation of humanity, the freedom of man and mind is nothing but a dream. They are right. It is the American Dream.” (MacLeish) Others, such as George Carlin, would hold a differing perspective, saying, “It’s called the American Dream because you have to be asleep to believe it.” (Carlin). Ultimately, from what one can observe, it is unprecedently clear that just as Americans have evolved and changed as times and modernization has emerged, so has the American Dream, and as American continues forward in the 21st century, only time will tell if the American Dream continues to hold its place in American values and traditions.

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“A Truce in Name Only (Ukraine-Russia)”

The sky never agreed to the ceasefire.
It shudders under the weight of machines
drones with no memory,
no mercy,
no belief in peace talks.

Overnight, cities blink in firelight,
not from candles or streetlamps,
but from strikes that arrive
even as leaders speak of diplomacy
with tired, twitching mouths.

They call it progress.
They call it negotiation.
But still, the air is sharp with smoke
and the ground does not forget
the weight of impact.

Zelenskyy says he will speak with Trump.
Maybe about futures,
maybe about leverage,
maybe about ghosts.

But the war doesn’t wait.
It flies through the dark
on rotors and steel wings,
ignoring every handshake.

Zyairh Henry

“Cabaret (and others) and How Art Creates a Collective Memory”

Cabaret poster. 1972. Allied Artists Pictures, *IMDb*,

“Leave your troubles outside… in here life is beautiful” (*Cabaret,* 03:30) are the first few words we hear at the beginning of *Cabaret* from the emcee played by Joel Grey. We are immediately immersed into this world of beautiful girls and music led by this extravagant character, all the while unbeknownst to us outside a darkness is looming. We are shown to be in Berlin in 1931, and all around we know and will come to see that the roots of fascism are intruding itself into the zeitgeist. A scary reality bubbling beneath the surface of this culture of care free fun in this Cabaret creates a sense of dread. “Tonight, we may lose this battle” (*Cabaret,* 05:16) the emcee says, almost as an innuendo. As the plot unfolds, the reality of this danger becomes harder and harder to ignore, creating a rift in the characters and invoking each defense mechanism within them. *Cabaret* uses personal stories and psychological complexity to illustrate how individuals cope—or fail to cope—with the rise of fascism in 1930s Berlin. By placing human behavior at the center of a historical narrative, the film not only reflects the dangers of political apathy and denial, but also reminds us of the vital role that art plays in preserving cultural memory and confronting uncomfortable truths to prevent history from repeating itself.

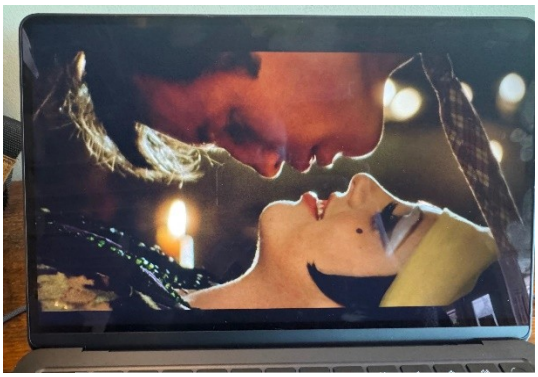
(*Cabaret*, 58:03)

(*Cabaret*, 02:09)

The looming presence of fascism's growth around the characters in *Cabaret* invoke a plethora of different reactions. The reasons behind such reactions can be tied into psychology, each person has a different defense mechanism. Georg Neothoff says "The term 'defense mechanisms' was coined over 100 years ago to describe a construct of psychological mecha- nisms for coping with intrapsychic conflicts" (Neothoff, 1), and each one of our characters in this film use a different mechanism in an attempt to alleviate the stressors in this political upheaval occurring all around them. This is in no doubt due to the presence of Nazi propaganda and support growing at the time, but also simply being in Germany at the time was bound to be plentiful with issues. Post World War One Germany had a myriad of issues that had both political and social disapproval, one being the plan of Germany to consciously ruin the economy to reduce the amount of reparation payments that was enforced from the War; which in turn affected wages and labor in the country. As well as the persistence of leaders in the German government maintaining the positions of power, despite the continuous disapproval from the people of Germany. John Horne says "What neither the Treaty of Versailles nor the new German government did was purge the old monarchical leaders from the military or the government administration. This may well have been the biggest flaw in the Weimar Republic." (Horne, 130), despite Weimar's attempts to make changes to improve the quality of life for the German population, the Social Democratic Party had established deals that were kept in place much to the chagrin of many citizens (Guettel, Jens-Uwe. "The Myth of the Pro-Colonialist SPD: German Social Democracy and Imperialism before World War I." *Central European History*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2012, pp. 452–84. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23270519. Accessed 21 Apr. 2025.) Needless to say, living in Germany at this time created a confusion of thoughts and concerns politically, and worried about how life would be for everyone. With that in mind, it is easy to see the appeal of the Cabaret, the dark lighting and otherworldly emcee inviting us into a whole new world that feels timeless, pure escapism. The inhabitants do not need to worry about what is going on, which is why our Emcee, who we only ever see very much within the walls of the Cabaret, have an indifference to the events around. The same can not be said for our other characters.

(*Cabaret*, 1:35:17)

Firstly we have our main character, Sally Bowles. Her defense mechanism is escapist, like the Cabaret itself. Her focus as we see is not at all on the issues of politics or social movements, she is entirely focused on herself. Despite many characters around her having these concerns and issues, she does not subject herself to that thought. When Natalia confides in her about her relationship with Fritz, she disengages with her concerns about if the love is real and him being christian saying “does it really matter as long as you are having fun” (*Cabaret,* 54:17). She consistently does not want to challenge these difficult concepts, choosing to ignore them, all the way up until the end when she sings for all the nazi soldiers inside the Cabaret. She says to Brian “I'm self centered, inconsiderate, and what was the third adjective? Oh yes, and I have this infantile fantasy that one day I will amount to something as an actress” (*Cabaret,* 1:35:33) all to simply block out everything around her. When you refuse to pay attention to anything else, all you can do is focus on yourself, as she admits in the final song “And as for me, as for me, I made my mind up back in Chelsea, When I go, I'm going like Elsie”, she is choosing her own world to stay in.



(*Cabaret*, 1:35:39)

Then we have Brian, who has a more middle of the road defense mechanism to these changes. They are drastic, confusing, and he wishes to educate himself and figure out what he thinks on his own. As the presence of the nazi party exponentially grows throughout the film, so does Brian’s realization that this is not a good situation in Germany, saying “Your paper and your party are pure crap sir!” (*Cabaret,* 1:27:36) which leads to him being injured by two nazis. Still though, his defense mechanism was to learn, and he knows now that this is not good, stillchoosing to push back against any ideology that supports the beliefs and values of nazis,

(*Cabaret*, 1:04:29)

even when it may not be smart to do so. An example of that being shortly after when he says “You don’t really believe that do you?” (*Cabaret,* 1:37:54) to Herr about his irrational thoughts towards Jews he believes are fact due to propaganda. Despite being more rational and calculated then others, he still has a clear defense mechanism of intellectualization, needing to develop his understanding on these stressful situations on his own terms.

(*Cabaret*, 52:31)

Lastly, we have the situation regarding Natalia and Fritz, more specifically, Natalia’s reaction to the situation around her. Natalia’s defense mechanism is pure isolation. She, being Jewish, is very concerned about the events happening around her. This leads her to block out those who she loves and cares for out of fear, Fritz being one of them. She says “The situation is impossible, we must not see each other anymore” (*Cabaret,* 1:21:45) to Fritz because the situation with the Nazi’s has become to overbearing on her, and her solution is to drop it all and isolate herself, even with his attempt of proposing to her, nothing will stop her from running away from it all.

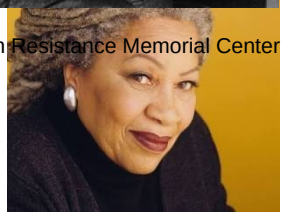
Each of these varied reactions to this time of crisis that we see in the film are deliberate, their ability or lack thereof to cope with this situation allows us into the world they are in through art. The way that *Cabaret* depicts these defense mechanisms envelops you into Berlin in 1931, it creates a connection that transcends what nonfiction is able to do. This is the vital role that art plays, it helps us develop this cultural memory and through the timelessness of art, can help us not repeat mistakes of the past.

(Cabaret, 1:23:27)

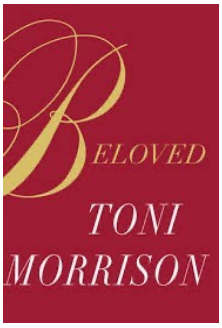
(*Cabaret*, 1:37:22)

Cabaret is not unique in its artistic ability to make cultural memories and educate, many films, forms of literature, pieces of music, and paintings each in their own way provide insight into the ability art has to transcend. *Cabaret* teaches us a lot, but the expansive idea surrounding art's ability to transcend and educate needs more resources to substantiate. Considering this, this next portion of the essay will refer to other works to reach the large scope of the thesis.

Image from German Resistance Memorial Center



Covering similar topics surrounding the political situation in 20th century Europe as *Cabaret* is, "The Magic Mountain" by Thomas Mann. His novel paints a portrait of pre-war Europe with this sanatorium, which is essentially a microcosm of the cultural issues of Europe all in one place. Philosophical debate between characters reflecting the clashing humanist and militaristic ideologies, those who refuse to engage with the reality of the crumbling country, only listening to Mozart, stuck living in the past. The themes within this work act as a warning to those dealing with these anxieties and ideological conflicts; Mann himself never takes a stand onto any position, only using the novel to suggest the flaws are everywhere, "will love someday rise up out of this too?" (Mann, 706). This question showcases the novel's mission to see how these issues can fester and bubble underneath the surface until blossoming in the events we come to see in 20th century Europe, showing extreme concern. This earned him a nobel prize, and is an essential work for those who seek to learn and change, to not repeat history.



Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage, 2004. Digital image. PenguinRandomHouse.com. Accessed 23 Apr. 2025.

Image From Rolling Stone

"Beloved" by Toni Morrison is also a work that has left an unimaginable impact, its connection to American history and slavery is essential for cultural memory. Sethe, an escaped slave woman, is still haunted with the atrocities of what has happened back on the farm, so much so that she kills her daughter Beloved, in order to prevent her from being taken back into slavery. Her being haunted by this, "Do you forgive me? Will you stay? You are safe here now" (Morrison, 254), illuminates us to the trauma that the damages of slavery have done. It is not something that can be simply fixed with legislation, it is a deep rooted issue that was and still is affecting many

people. “Beloved” has had an impact that awakens readers to the reality that this trauma is ongoing and will forever be a marker to remind us of atrocities committed in the past, in hopes for a better future.

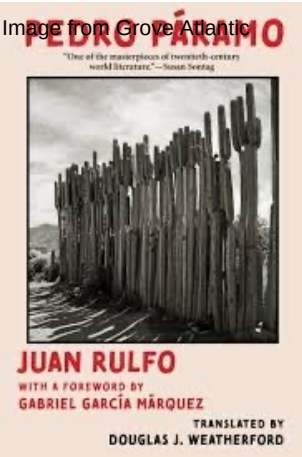


Image from Grove Atlantic

Lastly, we have “Pedro Páramo” by Juan Rulfo, whose essential piece of Mexican literature has influenced the likes of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. This work's impact on cultural memory is done in a more nuanced way, with our main character searching for his father, Pedro Páramo; only to find a literal ghost town. These ghosts in the town of Comala reveal the history of his father to him, “You'll find the voice of my memories closer to you then they are of my death.” (Rulfo, 6). He finds out his father was a tyrannical figure who ruined the town. The deeper he goes, the line between today and the past blur, only to eventually find out that he is dead himself. The novel itself, allowing these ghosts to release these memories reflects art’s ability to act as a vessel to expound information and memories as well. As well as the disjointed narrative reflecting art's complexity on how we see the past through these artistic works. The revelation of this town’s history was not able to be known until the memories were put to the page, reflecting the importance of art’s impact on cultural memory.

The fifth to tenth century was considered the dark ages due to its lack of educational growth, and most importantly, cultural exports. Artistic growth was limited, and people did not grow nearly at the rate expected. Art is essential for us humans to develop ideas and learn about the past to make us a better species now. These works have all examined how and why they are important for our cultural memory. *Cabaret* is an essential piece of media that proves this role by providing to the cultural memory of the rise of Fascism. The film allows us to learn from the characters feelings and actions, making misconceptions more difficult to achieve. Art bookmarks history, without it we would be lost as to past historical events, and makes it so we as a species can evolve and learn from past mistakes. Future development into this cultural memory is paramount for the progress of humanity.

(*Cabaret*, 2:02:28)

Dominick Proto

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“Deluge of the Drowned Sun (Floods in Spain)”

The rain did not fall
it descended,
as if the heavens were tired of holding it in.
Whole towns swallowed in a breath.
Cars floated like forgotten toys.
Windows shattered under water’s hunger.
And still, the clouds did not look away.
In Madrid, the streets turned against us.
In Valencia, the earth gasped and cracked,
not from thirst,
but from too much,
all at once.

People climbed to rooftops.
Some made it.
Some are still under the silence,
faces pressed into mud
as if listening for mercy.
They said it was historic.
But history is supposed to be past tense.
This
this feels endless.
Like the sky will never dry.

Zyairh Henry

“Elegy for a City in Ashes (LA Wildfires)”

There was no warning,
just heat
impossible, suffocating,
as if the sun had turned inward
and decided to burn us from the inside out.

Altadena. Palisades.

They’re names,
but not places anymore.

Now, they're smells
melted plastic, scorched pine,
the soft sweetness of something organic
dying too quickly.

Flames wrote their names across rooftops.

Smoke drowned the stars.

People packed decades into cardboard boxes
only to watch it all
turn to memory in orange light.

The churches didn’t hold.

Neither did the sky.

Thirty gone,
and no one sings for them.

Because you can’t mourn
when everything is still burning.

Zyairh Henry

“Unwell and Online (Domestic Discomfort) “

I see them every day
lit by the glow of their phones,
shoulders hunched like prayer,
but there's no god behind the glass.

They speak in memes,
laugh with dead eyes,
and post pictures of joy
like offerings
to no one.

I watch them spend money
they don’t have,
just to feel
like something’s happening.

They call it self-care.

It looks like drowning in real time.

They’re anxious all the time,
but numb when it counts.

Terrified of climate collapse,
but still ordering things
that arrive in too much plastic.

I hear them talk about burnout
like it’s a personality trait.

See them joke about therapy
as if healing is just another subscription.

I see their group chats light up
while they sit alone,
each one convinced
they're the only ghost in the room.

They're brilliant,
and exhausted.

Capable of anything,
but paralyzed by everything.

And me?

I just watch.

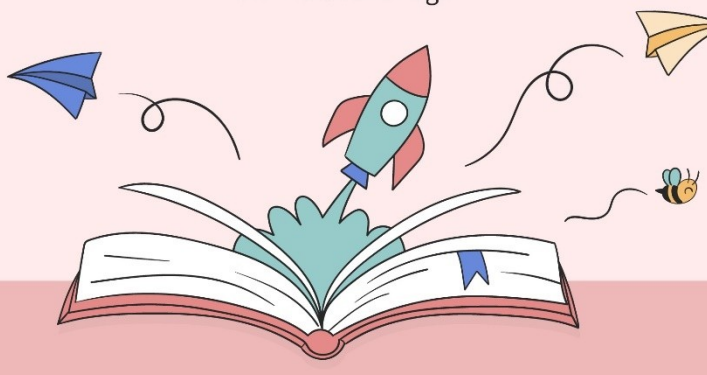
Scrolling past strangers
who look too familiar.

Wondering
if they know
how much it shows.

Zyairh Henry

Book ban

BY: McKenzie Page



What is a book ban

- Book bans usually comes in waves
- It's a form of censorship
- The books have a objection to their content (can be anything)
  - It can be from a individual, government, or organizations
- Books are removed from shelves and schools and all public access

Book ban background

In the 2023-2024 school year banned books were at a all time high with a 200% raise from the last year with over 10,000 books being banned.

Most of the books being banned are ones with people of color or books the mention the LGBTQ+ community

57% of the book being banned are due to “sexual content”

Almost 3 quarters of the books being banned are ones for a young adult audience

Book bans have also made its way into secondary education

Why this is a problem

Most of the books being pulled are ones that speak of race or sexuality or gender. Things people already have a hard time talking about or understanding. And organizations are scilensing groups of people because they don't like what they are hearing. The representation in books can make people and kids feel included and yet they are censoring things people can connect to. Free speech is a big right people feel is being neglected. You have free speech but yet books are being banned.

History of books being unattainable

1694- German translation of Lutheran Bible burned by Catholic pope

1931- Nazis burned books that had to do with judaism

1982- High school students protesting books that had to due with integration

2020- Black authors being taken out of public areas after Black Lives Matter protest

2023- People of color, LGBTQ community, and women have slowly been silenced and taken off shelves

"Banning books gives us silence when we need speech. It closes our ears when we need to listen. It makes us blind when we need sight."

—"Stephen Chbosky

Books being banned/tried

To Kill A Mockingbird- July 11th 1960 (Middle school/High school staple) **Banned**

Shakespeare plays- 1592-1634 (plays used in High school) **Banned/Tried**

Adventures of Huckleberry Finn- December 10th 1884 **Banned**

Pinkalicious- May 26th 2006 **Banned/Tried**

No David- September 1st 1998 **Banned**

Thoughts

Censorship never is a great thing but the ideas behind these books being banned are an opinion that you have to make on your own. I can tell you what I believe and you can tell me what you believe but no one will forever always agree on something. While I do believe that books can be inappropriate to some audiences I don't believe that they should be banned as a whole. There is so much more behind book bans that we will never fully know. Like why is it that books from years ago are being banned today? Why is it that we're not getting any answers about book bans? Why are books targeted for a certain audience being banned?

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“The Board of Education”

The department of education maintains the standards of education so that everyone has equal opportunity. Some people will say that the department has overreached but having the department ensures all students have equal opportunity no matter their situations. Having the department ensures there is funding for all. The cons outweigh the pros heavily in getting rid of the department. Without it many students would lose the funding they need like Titel 1. Many schools in underfunded areas would shut down due to loss of funding. The board Ensures that students with disabilities are getting what they need. Getting rid of the department would set students back rather than help them. It would restrict the number of middle and low class families being able to go to secondary schooling. The department is a necessity for all students and schools to have an equal opportunity in the world.

The first issue of getting rid of the department of education is a hard one to fully grasp. This source has numbers that give their claim credit for needing the board. But this source specifically speaks about students seeking higher education. And the importance the department plays. “The department issues about $100 billion in student loans a year along with $30 billion in Pell Grants.” (Knott). This amount of money is hard to fathom. That 30 billion dollars sends more kids to school a year than most could ever imagine. The Pell Grant is a needs-based grant that you file for through FAFSA; it's only given to people who are in need of the aid. Higher education such as university and trade schools are something most people don't think about when it comes to schools losing funding or the students. Without the education department many students wouldn't be able to pay for higher education and for families without the funds it wouldn't be an option.

The next issue with getting rid of the Department of Education would be having to pause Title 1 which is part of the 2001 leave no child Behind Act. It's where low income communities have money straight from the federal government that is given to them to fund their schools and fund their children. Title One actually funds a lot more than one would think. “One in five students, about 11 million, attend a Title I school. The program provides targeted funding to schools where at least 40% of the students come from low-income families, including schools that serve 200,000 homeless children, 1 million children with disabilities, and 2 million students with limited English proficiency.” (Memo). As one can see, Title One helps over 11 million students. While getting rid of the Department of Education would not completely stop Title One it would put it on a pause. And would definitely affect the money meaning that these millions of children who need this money will not have nearly as much. That will affect not only those students but those communities. From the same article it says “Title I provides $17 billion in funding for schools”(Memo). 17 billion dollars is a lot more than each state would be able to put towards their Title One students. Losing all of that funding would be losing tons of schools that help provide for these children. Not only is it the money schools get, these kids are also getting something called snack packs if they are on Title One meaning the government provides them snacks every Friday for them to take home

so that they'll be able to eat all weekend. Getting rid of the department does not mean getting rid of Title 1 as a whole. But it means getting rid of so much money that would help provide for these children and these families that rely on it.

The third issue of getting rid of the Department of Education would mean taking money from students with disabilities and those in special education. “Roughly 7.5 million students, or 15 percent of the student population, receive special education”(Walker). These students get special education from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Which gives about 15 billion dollars a year to support students with any type of disability or in any kind of special education. “This program could be transferred to another agency, making it significantly less likely that students with disabilities receive the services and support they need and deserve.”(Walker 2024). While it's said that the Education Act could be moved to a different department It's also said that they could lose their services and the money that they rely on. Special education is far broader than many think. It is not just the students who are born with severe disabilities and are in enclosed classrooms but also students who have learning disabilities like ADHD or dyslexia who are getting help for that. 15% of the student population does not sound like a lot but when you break it down to 7.5 million students it sounds like a crazy number. Taking away the money that is put into special education every year would throw everything off. These children would no longer be able to get the help that they need and all of these extra things that the department can provide for them to make them feel included in the rest of the school.

America's education department is something that needs a bit more regulation. Many people will say to get rid of it and to leave it to the states.And the overreach is a bit far but the numbers don't lie when it comes to the fact that the department is necessary for millions of students.

Hundreds of thousands of disabled children are funded to go to school, millions of immigrants are funded to go to school, millions of students who live in poverty are able to go to school. While getting rid of the Department of Education would not take away the necessity of the money, States do not have the same money and regulation that the federal government does and these students rely on that. Beyond elementary, middle, and high school there are those students going for secondary education, the ones who need degrees. Whether that's to be a doctor, a teacher, or an accountant without the Pell Grant or FAFSA millions of students would never make it. Middle class and low class families would never be able to Fathom the fact of going to college because without that 30 billion dollars and without the $100 billion dollars in FAFSA Loans students can't afford to go to school. That would also mean there's less doctors and less teachers there would be so many less college educated people because it would be unobtainable. While I understand the fight for dismantling the Department of Education the answer is not just getting rid of it entirely but maybe adding more regulation to them and trying to get the Department back to its roots of helping students.

The Department of Education was originally started to help students. It has grown ten folds of what it originally was and it might be a little too big. But the original plan for the Department of Education

is still there. The need for it is still there. Whether it's Title One or Title Nine or student loans the Department of Education is necessary in all ways. Not everyone is given what they need when they start life. Not everyone has a fair shot in life but the education system is the one place where every student should and can get the same opportunity. Without the Department of Education that will no longer be the case because where does one come up with all this extra money for Title One students? Where will you get the funding to make these after school programs for the children who have nowhere to go? How will secondary students get the chance to get a degree? How will students with disabilities get the help they need? While I understand that the Department of Education might have gotten a little too big it might have a little too much overreach overall the Department of Education is a necessity for so many children it is a necessity that America needs to get behind.

McKenzie Page

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“The Story of Mrs. Faogel: A Glance Into Positivity”

“Good morning Mrs. Faogel, can you look at these files and you have a meeting at 3 it’s at the East Wattawagna school campus, oh and there is a new student coming. She is a sixth grader coming in the new year. ” Mrs. Faogel smiled at her school secretary and nodded. She then stopped in her tracks why was she meeting with a sixth grader. It was summer new sixth graders came every year, at the end of the year and towards the beginning of summer, the school held an orientation for the sixth graders. She had already spoken to sixth graders why did she need to speak to one specific sixth grader. “Wait Shirley, I thought I had already spoken to the sixth graders that are coming this upcoming year. Is there another orientation that I forgot about?” Shirley shook her head. “No I would just go with it, all I know is her mother wants you to meet her. She says her daughter is very timid. ” Jane nodded and agreed to meet the girl, something told her this was going to be a very unique circumstance. While in her officeJane Faogel reflected on her past. She was a 45 year old woman who was the principal of Wattawagna Middle School. She was always a kind woman, and remembered why she had become an educator in the first place. She tried to always remind herself of why she wanted to be an educator, especially in the summer when she was getting the school ready for the school year. She was a mother for goodness sake she had an eight year old daughter and a twelve year old at home at least she got to see her son daily during the school year and her daughter walked to the middle school with one of the front office staff from the elementary school in the afternoon. Her eight year old daughter was named Anna and her son was named Todd. She also had a husband named Dave. She had a family like everybody else in the world did she supposed. She loved being an educator but on days like these when only the front office, assistant principals and custodial staff worked it could be easy to forget why she wanted to be a teacher. She went back in her mind to middle school, she was 13 years old and as always there was drama . But,

she had more than just regular school girl drama. She was raised by her aunt and grandma. They did their best for her but there was a lot they could not provide for her. Jane had always been a greatful girl. Ever since she could remember she was taught to give back. She would never forget her eighth grade homeroom teacher, Mrs. Koon telling her she herself should be a teacher, It was freezing out and she had an old raggety coat on and one of her classmates had no coat on. So as she was walking to homeroom Jane took off her jacket and put it on the girl. Jane told the girl," it's not much but it's something, on a day like today you need a coat." Mrs.Koon looked up as Jane and the girl were walking straight toward her. A bright smile appeared on her face as she saw who was coming. All of the teachers that knew her loved her. Once Mrs. Koon had noticed had given up her own coat, the smile on the woman's face disappeared. Mrs. Koon was sure that the girl had her own coat but just refused to wear one because she acted very wealthy and she did not want Jane to have to give up the only coat she had. She pulled Jane aside and asked her why she did that and Jane answered her. "Well miss, I saw she did not have a coat so I gave her mine." Mrs. Koon looked at the girl puzzled, but Jane I know the family personally and I know the girl has a coat of her own she just did not wear it." Her teacher insisted.She would never forget the look on Mrs. Koon's face when she said this. "Well Mrs. Koon, does it matter? Maybe you're right and maybe you're not. Who knows? The fact of the matter is she was still cold. Can she learn well cold?" The teacher's mouth dropped wide open. Her student was only 13 years old and what she said was not wrong. Teachers should not assume anything but she was only human. Then Mrs.Koon looked at her and said."Jane you are right, I should not have assumed she did not need your coat and you are right it does not matter whose coat it is as long as it keeps somebody warm. You know what Jane the world needs more leaders like you in the education system, if you're ever looking for a job in the education field let me know, I could be a good reference." At the time she had no idea what a reference was or why a reference was so important. She was only 13 years old. She just remembered somebody telling her she was good at something made her feel great and it made her believe in herself. From that day on Jane was determined to help somebody believe in herself. If this girl she was meeting is as good as she has heard then that girl might be just the person she could help guide. She smiled she had a new perspective about this day and this upcoming school year, besides she had to be positive, she always believed in leading by example. She came out of her office ready to go deal with people. She turned to her secretary Shirley. "Ok I am ready to go to this meeting and start the school year off right, you tell the girl's mother I would be more than happy to meet with them." Shirley nodded excitedly, her positive happy principal was back, the school year was going to be amazing.

Megan Paeth

ACT 3

shifting “beyond”
into the unknown
into the unknowable

transitions and takeaways

how does one move forward?
how do we move on?

goodbyes to hellos
hello to goodbyes
doors close
windows open
new meanings

Determination

“Boxing Gloves and Conversation Hearts: Self-Confidence and Relationships In *Rocky*”

The 1976 film *Rocky* is typically known for the infamous song titled “Gonna Fly Now” by soundtrack composer Bill Conti or for its acting by Sylvester Stallone, but for me, it’s the hidden theme of self-confidence and the building of the Will they? - Won’t they? The romantic relationship between Adrian and Rocky. This movie flips the underdog trope on its head and gives you emotion and excitement to see what truly happens to Rocky and his story. This illustrated analysis will examine the boxing culture prevalent in Rocky, not only how it built his self-confidence but also how it gave him a chance to unlock his full potential, and how a healthy relationship ultimately made him a true winner.

When I first watched *Rocky,* I only thought it would be a sweaty boxing movie with no real plot or ending messages to learn from, but I was wrong to assume, to judge based on its trailer. Yes, boxing is the sport that takes place in this film, but it’s not the only thing. The sport and art of boxing have been in movies since the dawn of the creation of films. “The history of the boxing film must begin with the introduction of moving pictures in 1894 because the cine-matic recording of fights and fighters began with the me-dium itself.” (Streible, Page 2). Alongside this quote, Streible introduces diverse types of boxing films and even recreations of known and loved fights. When we are introduced to boxing in *Rocky*, it is like a side plot that slowly creeps into full view. It is not until we meet his old boxing coach, Mickey (*Rocky* 00:54:16), that we get some more background on Rocky and why he is not in the ring. How his potential was shattered when he got into the wrong business to make money, “a waste of life.” It becomes a full circle when he is approached by Mr. Jergans and offered the chance to fight Apollo Creed, which is where we see boxing take full screen (*Rocky* 00:56:48). Now, witnessing a sport on film is not a new thing, but for it to be an Italian American fighter like Rocky, on screen, it’s a big deal. From a scholarly journal titled “The Real Rockys: A History of the Golden Age of Italian Americans in Boxing, 1900-1955” a work by Ronaldo Vitale and review by John Gennari, he lists his experience of watching his Italian ancestors and family watch the culture of boxing representing Italians, from listening to the bout on the radio to now watching them on the big screen. A cherished memory, and to now have it repeated through other media. “But now came Sylvester Stallone's immensely popular Rocky film cycle and Martin

Rocky (00:56:18)

Scorsese and Robert De Niro's cinematic masterwork Raging Bull, ensuring that the mythic figure of the Italian American fighter would become permanently fixed in the modern popular imagination." (Gennari, Page 1). Thanks to Sylvester Stallone, there is another part of Italian history on screen, which grows to the hope or expectation of the "American Dream." The Italian Stallion nervously approaches this dream, and he doubts himself. After much consideration, Rocky agrees to fight Apollo Creed for the Heavyweight championship. From this moment, the Italian Stalin takes on the trials of training, which not only rebuilds his muscle memory but also rebuilds his self-confidence.

The focal point of an individual in society is commonly overlooked in action films. In *Rocky*, we meet Rocky in this awkward phase of being indifferent to his decisions and life. "In this repetitive life, it is really hard to produce a life purpose for himself and to add a meaning to its life. Like many lower class people, he lives a pessimistic, depressed and introverted life." (Uysal, Page 47). A tear-jerking scene presents itself when Rocky comes home and picks up a picture that is himself when he was younger, assuming what he's thinking, he's comparing his life to when he was younger, compared to the fearful now, where everyone considers him a "bum". (*Rocky* 00:09:14). In this article entitled, "Fighting for Manhood: Rocky and Turn-of-the-Century Antimodernism" written by Clay Motley, he discusses the pollical and economic troubles surrounding the 1970's and the events that Rocky would be facing in his everyday life to reclaim his manhood in a time of absolute confusion and loss of purpose. In this quote, Motley perfectly describes what Rocky could be feeling when looking at his childhood picture and how it situationally fits America during this period. "The flat-topped, smiling youth in the picture represents America of the 1950s, a place of success, potential, and optimism. The modern, wounded fighter, declared past his prime, symbolizes the loss of that potential by the 1970s, the failing of America to live up to the promises of its past." (Motley).

Rocky (00:09:08)

Rocky is not standing confidently on his lifepath, he is doing dirty work for a loan shark, and in between that, he is flirting with the cashier at the local pet shop, Adrain, his best friend Paulie's sister. Though this life is repetitive and slow, when he gets a wake-up call from Mickey that he is wasting his life (*Rocky* 00:54:16), it gives him a chance to see his purpose. Going through the difficult challenges of preparing for a match, not only is this changing his carved-out routine that was based around his current life, but he is also making new space to grow his strength and confidence. When Rocky's training starts, he struggles; it seems like he has not trained for something this big in a long time. (*Rocky* 01:12:18), He first wakes up at 4:00 am to run and build his endurance, but even that falls short as he is in pain the entire time. Rocky is starting to understand how hard a challenge it is going to be, not only a physical

Rocky (01:33:10)

Rocky (01:16:36)

change in his body, but a positive change for his growth and personality. Rocky isn't alone during this draining training process. Paulie, who works at the meat shop, one day in frustration Paulie punched the meat carcasses. In turn, Rocky got the idea to hit them to train, something so insane, but it helps him to be stronger. Rocky's manager Mickey does not leave his side either, something integral to building his endurance and confidence. For Rocky to grow into his full potential, he must have the right people cheering him on, and I believe he did. From the growing support around him, Rocky is almost unstoppable. (*Rocky* 01:31:02), We get the most iconic scene this film is known for. Rocky is in his training montage running past passersby, smiling, and running up the stairs in Philadelphia with the early sunrise lighting the sky as he makes the distance upstairs, practically skipping. In this moment, he knows he has done it, he has trained himself back into the fighter he knows he can be, he has grown to be confident by the people and sport that surrounds him. Rocky started as an individual in society, but he

graduated from society and gave himself a name, a name that an arena full of people will yell and cheer for. But this sport is not the only thing that boosts his confidence; the relationship between Rocky and Adrian proves to be the key.

Now we cannot talk about Rocky and not talk about Adrian. This relationship must be such an amazing example of a healthy on-screen relationship. Rocky met Adrian at the pet store where she works, he comes in occasionally to buy food for his turtles and to tell her jokes just to get her to smile. In this article, “Running with Butkus: Animals and Animality in Rocky,” written by Jason Price. He discusses the use and presence of animals in Rocky, down to his turtle’s Cuff and Link to Rocky hitting animal carcasses in a meat shop to train. Price brilliantly finds common themes of animals as an important part of certain Rocky films. Price shares the portrayed view of Rocky and Adrian surrounding animals. “He is portrayed as caring for animals, looking after pet turtles in his dirty apartment, and later running with his bullmastiff Butkus. Adrian, a pet store employee and sister to Paulie, purchased Butkus for Rocky as a running companion and as she later becomes his love interest-…” (Price Page 89). Adrian is Paulie's sister, and Paulie happens to be Rocky's best friend. Though meeting Adrian, she seems a bit shy, and the relationship feels quite forced from Paulie's end. On Thanksgiving, Rocky comes over without her knowing, Paulie practically embarrasses Adrian by yelling and screaming at her to go on a date with Rocky (*Rocky* 00:36:14). After much convincing, she leaves with Rocky and they go ice skating, where they open to each other and Adrain gets more comfortable around Rocky. After walking to Rocky's apartment, they share a confident yet hesitant kiss, and from there, they are cemented as dating (*Rocky* 00:52:49). Total Rocky, a very impressive fan-run website containing all knowledge about the films, has a biography about Adrian Pennino. They described her young childhood in her Italian Catholic home under constant anxiety and fear stemming from her mother. “She grew up isolated, intelligent, and introverted, with her nose always in a book. She never had real friends, barely spoke to people outside the family, and carried herself like someone hoping not to be noticed.” (Total Rocky). But when she meets Rocky and they become a couple, her job at the pet store is a beautiful coincidence of him finding her. His love for animals and love for Adrian share the same coin. Not only did Adrian gift Rocky his running friend sidekick dog, Butkus, but Adrian had more in mind to support Rocky. Adrian becomes integral to Rocky's confidence and growth.

Rocky (00:43:47)

Adrian is Rocky's reason for going through the boxing match, or even striving to be a better version of himself. Adrian is Rocky's soft side and helps cater to his confidence and happiness. When Rocky does a TV interview for the promotion of his fight, he seems happy in the presence of Paulie and Adrian. Later, when Rocky and Adrian are alone, He confesses to her that he hates doing the interviews, that he thinks he is just stupid and embarrassing himself (*Rocky 01:01:10)*. Rocky broke that level of comfort with Adrian to rant and say what he is thinking, and this is so huge. He is comfortable around her, and he feels free to be himself and not a different person for her. He does this again the night before the fight, he lies with Adrian in bed while he explains why he cannot fight Creed, that he does not think he can do it. Adrian comforts him and reassures him. Rocky goes on to comment on how he wants to prove that he's not another bum from a neighborhood, that he has a chance at a good life (*Rocky 01:37:22).* This is so beautiful to see because Rocky would not have told anyone if Adrian were not there. When the boxing match ended and we discovered Rocky did not win, it did not matter to him. He stood and yelled for Adrain, We cut to Adrain in this scene running through crowds of people just to get to Rocky. They finally find each other and embrace, not without exchanging their first “I love you” to each other, Rocky only wanted to be somebody to someone (*Rocky* 01:57:18). Adrian was a listener and a loud motivator for Rocky, even though she did not like the idea of him boxing. Rocky proved himself to Adrian and proved himself to his anxieties that he is not another bum, which helped him climb the final steps to self-confidence.

Rocky (01:57:04)

In conclusion, this illustrated analysis examined the boxing culture prevalent in Rocky, not only how it built his self-confidence but also how it gave him a chance to unlock his full potential, and how a healthy relationship ultimately made him a true winner. This analysis uses scholarly articles and works to further this point. Though Rocky did not win the fight in the end, he won the true prize of a beautiful relationship and self-confidence. Two things he lacked at the beginning of this film and re-igniting his passion for boxing along the way. *Rocky* is an integral piece of film history and sheds light on an unheard story of a neighborhood boxer with a dream of a better life, and in the end, he achieved it all.

Kathryn Angle

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“Untitled”

When the trailer for *Rocky* begins, it doesn’t jump right into action, it opens with slow, brooding music and gritty shots of Philadelphia, channeling something raw and real. In this world, Rocky Balboa is not a superstar. He’s a struggling, soft-spoken, working-class boxer with “heart” but no title, and that’s the whole point. Released in 1976, the film coincided with America’s bicentennial, a moment of cultural self-reflection. At its core, *Rocky* became a metaphor for a country redefining its identity through perseverance and the pursuit of opportunity. In this paper, I expand on the idea and focal points that *Rocky* functions as a cinematic representation of the American Dream during a time of national uncertainty. By examining the film’s context and its symbolic value, we understand how *Rocky* helped shape American cultural identity.

The 1970s were defined by turmoil: the aftershocks of the Vietnam War, inflation and widespread skepticism toward institutions. Cities like Philadelphia faced unemployment, and urban decline which is the very landscape captured in *Rocky*. As Baig (2023) writes, *Rocky* emerged “at a time when America needed hope,” offering not just escapism but a new kind of “hero”: one who was relatable, flawed but determined. This context is essential because Rocky Balboa is not a traditional action star. He is emblematic of the working-class individual trying to “go the distance” in a society where possibilities seemed increasingly out of reach. His training montages, especially the iconic run up the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art (featured heavily in the trailer), became a metaphor for determination and resilience.

Rocky’s power lies in its narrative structure which is the underdog story. As Sid Quashie notes, Rocky “embodied the blue-collar hero that audiences were craving.” The odds are against him to win, however he just wants to prove he belongs. The film’s aesthetics reinforce this; Rocky’s neighborhood is grey and decaying. His opponent, Apollo Creed, is polished and professional, a clear representation of a system that Rocky is not expected to succeed in. It’s no accident that the trailer ends not with the outcome of the fight, but with emotional peaks such as Adrian’s voice and also the training montage. The focus is on the attempt, not the victory.

Beyond its thematic resonance, *Rocky* altered the sports film genre. According to “How ‘Rocky’ Became the Sports Movie That Changed the Genre Forever,” it created a formula still in use: the personal journey, the montage, the climactic, and emotional. What makes *Rocky* distinct is its blend of realism and aspiration—it doesn’t “glamorize” the sport of boxing but uses it as a backdrop for character development. Antezana (1000) emphasizes this, calling *Rocky* “the ideal mix of sports and spirit.” Its authenticity stems from Sylvester Stallone’s own story: an unknown writer and actor betting everything on a script no studio wanted, mirroring Rocky’s own gamble..

Nearly 50 years later, *Rocky* remains an icon. Its themes of self-belief, resilience, dignity have remained relevant. As Baig (2023) explains, Rocky is impactful because he shows that “you don’t have to

win to be victorious.” In a culture that often confuses success with domination, *Rocky* symbolizes success as perseverance. In this current climate, *Rocky* offers a needed reminder of grace under pressure. It shows how film can transcend entertainment and become part of a national conversation of real world topics. As viewers, understanding *Rocky* in its full context helps us better understand ourselves and the myths we still tell about hope, identity, and what it means to go the distance.

Leah Reza

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“From Failure to Flourish: My Journey Through Self-Doubt”

At one point in my college journey, I felt completely overwhelmed struggling to keep up with assignments, watching my grades slip further and further. No matter how hard I tried, I was always one step behind. The feeling of failure weighed heavily on me, making me question whether I even belonged in college or not. I remember the frustration of staring at a blank screen, unable to put my thoughts into words, and the anxiety of walking into class unprepared, knowing I hadn't done enough. It wasn't just about the grades—- I felt like I was failing myself. But something inside me refused to give up. I knew I had to make a change if I wanted a different outcome. It wasn't easy, but I started looking at my failures as lessons instead of roadblocks. I sought help from professors, organized my studying habits, and put in the effort to truly engage with the material. Little by little, I started to see progress.

When I first began taking college classes, I thought it was going to be the bee's knees and thought it was going to be super easy but I was so wrong. I first started my first two semesters of college failing different assignments, failing quizzes, and withdrawing from different courses. When I started my Fall 2021 semester, I was hit hard with difficult assignments and hard quizzes. During the whole semester, I tried my best trying everything in my power to pass with a good decent grade but my efforts came back to hit me in the face. On some assignments, I would try to fully comprehend and follow what each assignment was telling me to do, but whenever I tried to email my professors they wouldn't explain it to me in the best way possible. I even tried getting help from a tutor for the first time but that was also unsuccessful for me. Until the end of the semester, I was so stressed out and overwhelmed about how my first semester was going I didn't know what to do or where to go from there, so I ended up withdrawing from not one, but three different classes, English 101, History Western Civ to 1689, and Public Speaking and I also ended up failing Art History and Appreciation. The only class I managed to pass that semester was General Psychology. To me, failing a college class felt like a mixture of frustration, disappointment, and self-doubt. At first, I kept telling myself I'd catch up or that things would get better, but as the semester went on, it became clear I was slipping further behind. I tried to manage it, but balancing assignments, tests, and my personal life felt very overwhelming. There were times I wanted to ask for help, but I couldn't bring myself to do so. It's not that I didn't care, I did but I started questioning whether I was even cut out for college. When my first semester of college began, I would always try to study my notes with flashcards and simply read my notes over and over again but at the same time I would also tend to procrastinate, which led to my grades beginning to drop. Every time I saw my grades drop, I felt like I was letting myself and everyone around me down. It’s hard to talk about failing because it feels like admitting I’m not good enough. Still, deep down, I know this isn’t the end.

Afterwards, I learned that practice definitely makes perfect, because later on in my semesters I began to improve in all my college classes. At first, I felt a bit unsure of myself, especially when it came to speaking up in discussions or sharing my ideas.

But over time, I began to notice small changes. By the Fall semester of 2022, I began seeing major improvements in my final grades. During the Fall of 2022, I passed Intermediate Algebra with a "B" and Sociology with a "C" and every semester that came along I passed with high marks. I started to become more focused on my work and making sure I understood every unit I learned in my courses. I've also become more and more productive when it comes to studying for quizzes. I stopped using flashcards to study, but rather I began gathering all my important notes into a website called "Quizlet" to help me study more. By gathering all my important knowledge into one while creating my study guide, I began to see a remarkable improvement in my performance when it comes to taking quizzes and tests. Another thing that has helped is preparing more thoroughly before class, when I know the material well, it gives me the confidence to contribute to conversations. Also, I've started to see the value in listening to my classmates' perspectives, it sparks new ideas and makes the discussion richer. There's still a lot I'm learning, but I feel like I'm finding my voice and developing a sense of confidence that I didn't have before. It's encouraging to see my efforts paying off, and it motivates me to keep growing and be more confident.

The journey from failing college classes to flourishing in them has been one of the most challenging yet rewarding experiences of my life. At my lowest point, I felt lost and extremely discouraged, questioning whether I was even capable of succeeding in college. The constant weight of failure made it hard to find the motivation to keep going. However, that difficult period taught me some of the most important lessons about resilience, self-discipline, and the power of persistence. Slowly, I began to shift my mindset-realizing that failure wasn't the end, but rather an opportunity to learn and grow. I started making small changes, like managing my time better, seeking help from professors, and changing my studying habits. These small steps built my confidence little by little. I learned that success doesn't happen overnight but through consistent effort and dedication. Along the way, I discovered that asking for help wasn't a sign of weakness but a sign of strength. The more I engaged with the material and connected with my peers, the more I began to enjoy learning. What once felt like an uphill battle began to feel like a journey of self-discovery. Now, as I find myself flourishing in my classes, I'm proud of how far I've come. The setbacks I faced were necessary for my growth, teaching me that failure is not permanent unless I let it be. This experience has not only changed my academic performance but also reshaped how I approach challenges in life. I know there will still be difficult moments ahead, but I feel equipped to handle them with determination and confidence.

Joi Smith

“Weight of Passion”

A project starts, another life begun anew.
Each passion calls, though daylight starts to fade.

Brushes, journals, scattered in my view,
their voices rise, a chorus I have made.

I make a vow: no more relentless delay,
yet still I chase obsessions born anew.

The guilt creeps in, but dreams will not fade.
They tug my mind toward every start I've made.
I stack them high, but order meets delay,
lost halfway through what once had felt so new.

A canvas waits, a novel half in view,
a melody unfinished drifts anew.
I brace myself to push through past delay,
but shiny thoughts distract what I have made.

Perhaps the joy is not in journeys done,
but in the flash that kindles something bright.

Each fleeting spark, each rabbit trail I run,
is still a burst of wildly burning light.
I wonder if I'll ever see one through,
or if I'm meant to always chase the new.

But maybe there's a beauty in that view,
a restless heart, not built to see things through,
but shaped by trails of all I've ever made,
each piece a start, a flame that won't quite fade.

So I'll release regret for each delay,
and wear the weight of passion, born anew.

Rae Bundrick

"Facing Social Anxiety: How the Library Changed Me"

"I can do this," I kept saying to myself, my hands clenched around the bottom of my shirt as I stood in the youth section of the library. I could see the librarian sitting at the desk, her eyes glued to the computer screen as she typed, stopping occasionally to flip through a stack of paperwork beside her. The library seemed busier than usual. A few kids played in the puppet theater in the corner of the children's

section, their laughter rising and falling as they acted out their own little stories. Some mothers sat nearby, reading softly to their children, and I could hear the sound of pages turning. Footsteps echoed as kids walked between the aisles, picking up books before settling into chairs.

It all felt so overwhelming.

I had been coming to the Lexington County Public Library for as long as I could remember. One of the first gifts my parents gave me after they adopted me was a library card—a small plastic card that was probably the most used gift I'd ever received. The library had always been my safe haven—a quiet place where the stories and characters made the world feel a little less lonely. But today felt different.

I wasn't here just to disappear into the shelves and read another book. I needed help. And that meant doing something I'd always tried to avoid—talking to someone I didn't know.

I stared at the librarian. She had short, wavy hair and round glasses. My stomach twisted a little tighter, like it was knotting itself into a ball. *What if I asked for a book recommendation and she laughed at me?* The thought made my chest ache. *What if my voice came out weird, or I said something dumb?* My heart pounded so loudly it echoed in my ears and drowned out the shuffle of pages and distant whispers around me. I could feel the heat flushing my cheeks, and I pressed my sweaty palms awkwardly against the fabric of my shirt, trying to find something solid to hold onto.

I took a deep breath, but it felt like the air got stuck on the way down. My feet stayed planted like someone had glued them to the carpet. The voices of the kids playing and mothers reading blurred into one loud hum in my head.

But then I thought about the stack of books at home—books I'd read over and over again until the covers were worn and the pages were soft at the edges. I wanted something new, something exciting. And I couldn't find that by standing still.

I loosened my grip on my shirt and whispered, "I can do this," one last time.

And then I moved.

It felt like walking through water—every step slow and heavy. But somehow, I made it to the desk. The librarian looked up, and for a terrifying second, our eyes met. I almost turned around right then. But then she smiled. Not a big smile—just a small, kind one that reached her eyes.

"Hi there," she said like she knew I was nervous without me having to say a word. "Can I help you with something?"

My throat felt dry, and for a second, I thought I wouldn't be able to say anything. But I forced the words out, my voice barely louder than a whisper.

"Um… do you have any book recommendations?"

She tilted her head, thinking for a moment. “Sure! What kinds of stories do you like?”

I blinked. I hadn’t expected her to ask me that. I was so focused on getting the question out that I didn’t think about how I’d answer hers.

“I like adventure books,” I said quietly. “And, um… fantasy books too?”

Her smile widened. “I’ve got just the thing.”

She stood up and motioned for me to follow her to a nearby shelf. The anxiety that had been sitting on my chest started to lift a little as I walked behind her. The smell of books grew stronger the deeper we went into the aisles, as if the stories themselves were waiting for me to find them. She pulled out a book with a dark blue cover and handed it to me.

Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief.

“This is one of my favorites,” she said. “It’s about a boy who discovers he’s the son of a Greek god and goes on all sorts of adventures. I think you’ll like it.”

I ran my fingers over the cover, the cool, smooth surface. I could feel the weight of the book in my hands. I smiled—a small one, but a real one.

“Thank you,” I whispered.

As I checked out the book and walked out of the library that day, the world felt just a little bit different. The space between me and other people didn’t feel so wide. That simple conversation, that tiny step, had opened up a whole new world—not just in the pages of *Percy Jackson*, but in me.

And it all started in the library, a place that had always felt like a home to me.

Caelin Riley

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“CAN YOU DIG IT SUCKA”

That’s the name they scream
when the lights go down and the bell rings.

That’s the name that echoes through the rafters,
through the streets,
through the hearts of the fans.

Born in Houston, Texas,
where the sun shines hard and the streets are tough,
Booker grew up with nothing but a dream,
a dream that danced through his head like the sound of the game-winning shot,
like the sound of the final bell ringing,
the sound of victory.

He didn’t have the money.

He didn’t have the privilege.

He didn’t have the easy road.

But he had heart.

And that heart?

It was built from sweat,
and struggle,
and survival.

In the streets of Houston,
Booker T was just another kid trying to make it.

But when he stepped into the ring—
something changed.

He wasn’t just Booker from the block.

He was Booker the champ.

Booker the king.

Booker the fighter.

They called him *The Harlem Heat*
when he and his brother Stevie Ray hit the scene,
like fire and flame,
like speed and strength,
burning through the competition.

Together, they were unstoppable.

Together, they were legends.

But Booker?

Booker knew his moment was coming.

And it did.

Five times,
five times,
five times,

Booker T stood at the top of the mountain,
the World Champion.

Not once.

Not twice.

But five times.

Five times, he held that gold,
Booker T. had been knocked down,
slammed on the mat, and kicked to the curb more times than he could count.

From growing up in the tough streets of Houston, Texas,
to facing the pain of losing his brother in the wrestling world,
Booker fought for everything he had. His journey wasn't easy,
full of hurdles and moments when giving up seemed like the best option.

But Booker T. didn't give up.

He didn't let his past define him.

No, he kept pushing, grinding, with each loss fueling his hunger for more.

Then came that moment, *The Great American Bash,* 2006.

He was facing Rey Mysterio, a man who had been a champion in his own right.

It wasn't just a match. It wasn't just about the title.

It was about proving to himself that all his struggles meant something,
that after years of fighting
sacrificing, this was *his* moment.

And when that three-count echoed in his ear,

Booker T. knew—it wasn't just the gold he had won,
it was his hardest battle,
the one that truly made him a champion.
he held that strap,
he held the promise that a kid from the streets could rise.

Five times he showed them—

You don't need to come from wealth.

You don’t need to come from privilege.

You just need heart.

And Booker had heart.

When he was a champion,
he wasn’t just a champion for the fans,
he wasn’t just a champion for the industry.

He was a champion for the black community,
for the kids who dreamed big but couldn’t see the path.

For the ones who were told they were too much,
or too little,
or not enough.

For the ones who needed to hear:

You can make it.

You can rise.

You can fight your way to the top.

Booker T showed them that.

Five-time World Champion.

Five-time World Champion.

Five-time World Champion.

That’s what they said about him.

Not just a wrestler.

Not just a fighter.

But an icon.

An inspiration.

A symbol of strength,
of perseverance,
of pride.

And when the bell rang—
and Booker T stood in that ring,
raised his arms,
his chest out,
his heart full,
he wasn’t just a champion for today.

He was a champion for tomorrow.

For the kids who would follow.

For the next generation of black wrestlers
who would see in Booker T the possibility of greatness.

Because Booker T,
the five-time,
five time,
five time,
five time,
five-time World Champion,
didn't just win titles.

He won hearts.

He won minds.

He won respect.

And he did it the only way he knew how—
with hustle,
with grit,
with grace.

Five times, he raised that belt,
five times, he made history.

But in the end, it wasn't about the belt.

It was about the legacy.

And Booker T?

He built a legacy that no one could tear down.

No one.

Now can you dig that?

SUCKA!

Ian Brooks

"A Young Waitress"

The tea still steams, the dishes clink,
I weave through tables, barely think.
Shoes worn thin, hands rough with toil,
Long hours blur in kitchen oil.

From dawn to dusk, the grind won't cease,
Bills pile up, my pay's a crease.
A heavy tray, a practiced smile,
Each weary step—a measured mile.

Yet tips come steady, nights run deep,
And hard-won coins are mine to keep.
Dreams stitched tight with calloused thread,
Still, hope burns bright where hunger’s fed.

The weight of want, the strain of need,
But work can plant a stubborn seed.
And one day soon, past all this strife,
I'll build a richer, fuller life.

Kennedi Moore

Beyond Reality

“The Beings and Forces that Lurk Beneath”

In a time not so long ago, three men watched and waited
A storm worsening made the air stand still,
Too still they thought as they remembered times before
Of ages and tales of these very situations, some could recall
Though many not dare, lest it commence once again.
For a long time, there was peace with these spirits and ghouls
Brooding silence could be felt, the pounding pressure of the creatures’
Eyes watching and stalking all, vigilantly and silently.
His eyes heavy but watchful and mind on the most alert, Grigore stared
Into the almost impossible darkness out of the guard tower window,
Taking a deep inhale on his pipe, he knew the trouble was just beginning
Gherla prison was where they were, deep in the Transylvanian countryside.

The storm raged on, and stronger it grew; a bitter wind whistled
Against the thin windows, thunder booming as lightning filled the sky
With tremendous and bright flashes of mysterious doom.
Mihail and Alexandru sat playing cards to distract the filling dread,
But it was to no avail as their intuition gnawed at their minds
As if warning them what might and was to come.

They grew restless, and Mihail animatedly threw down his cards
The two men shook hands as Alexandru collected the game’s earnings,
“My money lost again; I just could not make it work
Alas, I fear that a bad card game might be the least of worries
Though it could be fitting, as I fear a bad hand coming,”
Mihail proclaimed as he sighed a full breath.
He and Alexandru arose wearily, stretching every nerve
Walking over to the grand lookout, chills spread throughout their cores
Through the smoky room, the dim light filtered,
The radio softly played music in the background
An eerie and fitting tune of “When the Levee Breaks.”

A flash of impossible light lit up the front lawn of the prison
Upon the hill, from the window, Grigore could see them,
Beings dressed in white, singing and chanting in a circle.
The most enchantingly beautiful beings you could ever glimpse
The three men stood tense, looking out
Peeping at the magnificently frightening sight.
Ielele[1] was what they were,
Seductive and charming beings that would lure men in
Acting cunningly, mischievous in their strange ways
Only to either play tricks on you or to lead you to your fate.
These were the devilish angelic creatures, the men knew all too well
As the three of them had almost met their dreary doom
To the ielele, and their indescribably undeniable charm.

They held the lightning in place, controlling the unrelenting storm
Using their supernatural and magically mystical powers.
As the ielele chanted, a circle of great fire grew around them,
It called to lonesome souls, tempting false promises to any to walk over it

[1] Ielele: Yeh-leh-leh (Pl)

For those who do go up in a blaze of eternal flame.
As they sang their mesmerizing song, the storm grew ever stronger,
Hurricane-level wind and rain howled and poured
Threatening to rip apart the old building and shatter glass.
Through the eerie light, the men could see the leader
An elder iele[2], most ancient and enchanting, raised her arms up,
She pierced into the gloomy night sky, her eyes seemed to glow
Almost telepathically, they could hear her alluring melody—
Tantalizingly ethereal, dark yet pleasing all the same.

The other ielele joined in, and the song reached a roaring crescendo
All the night's air seemed to be sucked toward them
The elder brought down her arms, and a gust hit the prison—
A gale blew so powerfully that the walls trembled mightily,
And the very foundation shook with a monstrous tremor.
Then, there was a deafening bang, a clanging on some deep gate
It clashed so thunderously and echoing, that everything quaked.
And with that, the ielele vanished, fading into nothing
Left behind was only that perfect circle of scorched earth
And with their leaving, went the wrathful, raging storm.
Instead, what replaced it was an energy far worse,
A feeling of tension in the air so taut, it was far beyond palpable
Everything held its breath on edge, waiting for something,
It was as if the ielele had cast their sorcerous spell
Keeping time flowing, but the atmosphere standing still.

The three men glanced at each other, their bowels turning to ice,
And they knew for certain now that those beings had returned.
Grigore shuddered once more before he spoke in a frightened tone:
"Well, I do fear there goes the dungeon's entrance,
Like last time, the terrible beasts broke into to wreak havoc
They'll kill the dangerous, beckoning them to join."
Alexandru and Mihail nodded in agreement with their stomachs in knots.

Just then, there were several deafening, ear-splitting howls
Horrible sounds of tortured undead souls back to inflict harm and malice
They came from far below where the bang had just been,
And all three men froze, color draining from their faces, leaving them pale,
Goosebumps sharply raised their hair on the highest alert.
Alexandru shuddered, an icy chill going up his spine,
"Pricolici[3]!" He exclaimed in a petrified and whispery tone.
Grigore furrowed his bushy brow, face growing grim,
The same chill went up his spine, and he gravely murmured:
"Yes, it is worse than imagined; they must be working together.
But how is that possible?
What has happened to anger them so?
We have not sought to disturb them, but now that does not matter,
We must do what we can to defeat them now—however, that can be."
He drew deeply on his pipe, exhaling a smoky, unsteady sigh.

Mahail gulped fearfully, his throat clicking dryly.
Curiously, in a hushed tone, he nervously questioned:

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[2] Iele: Yeh-leh (Sg)

[3] Pricolici: Pree-koh-lee-ch (singular and plural)

“How must we go about it?
Last time we lost many, and gave prisoners as sacrifices
And half of our guards were killed, mercilessly ripped to shreds.
Gherla was almost shuttered, and the town itself destroyed.”
He shook his head, muttering curses uneasily under his breath.

Alexandru shook his head as if clearing his mind from the terror
He tried to feel and remember their tune from the last time
Pensively and solemnly, he focused and silently thought:
Is it still there?
Or am I just imagining?
Staring blankly, like he was in some trance, he pinpointed the ielele song,
Snapping back, his eyes widened keenly, remembering their wish.
Confidently but still shaken, he somberly stated:
“They are upset ‘cause we did not listen to their final wish
Yes, we gave many prisoners to please them, alas, it was not enough
We did not sacrifice our strongest man to them as they requested.
Beyond that, we saw them dancing—we should not have
As they become angry, vengeful beings if one gazes upon their sacred hora,
Now they will exact their wrath unto us, as they are quite tricksters.
If we follow their word, they will grant us everlasting peace
From all the other malicious beings…especially the ones down below.”
He inhaled a huge breath, slowly and deeply through his nose
Pushing up his large-framed aviator glasses apprehensively.

Grigore and Mihail glanced pensively and anxiously at each other
They nodded hesitantly and tensely turned to him.
Alexandru then solemnly and assertively spoke:
“We must make haste as we do not know the extent of the damage,
I know we all clearly remember the carnage of last time.”
They all nodded grimly, grimacing and shivering once more.

Before Grigore could speak, an alarmed voice came over the main radio:
“Mayday! Mayday!
The pricolci have breached inside through the dungeon entrance
I repeat……”
There was a piercing, blood-curdling scream, then the radio went silent.
Another terrible beast let out another shrieking, deafening roar
Far below, blasting machine gunfire resonated throughout the halls
Other agonizing wails rang out as the relentless slaughter continued,
Grigore’s heart dropped, a hopeless dread filling his body.

The three stood on edge and deathly still, petrified by memories
Recalling those terrible and grotesque creatures of monstrous size
Gruesome, nightmarish fiends back from the murky grave
Undead specters of merciless men, returning to evoke mayhem.
They recollected pricolici’s soulless, hellish, and piercing stare
And its ferocious, bloodthirsty snarl from a mouth of a thousand daggers.

The three thought about how, at first, the Ielele came to Gherla,
Kind spirits not asking for much, always appearing randomly
As if they were living there, far beneath the prison in their own halls.
Curious, enchanting beings, though no one knew what they were
Grigore could recollect the first time he heard them sing,
A mesmerizing tune, tempting the unknowing to view their sacred dance
For when that happened, all was unfortunately lost

Many a man died, but none then knew why.
They did not announce themselves as the magical beings they were
They hid in the shadows, using the pricolici's violent ways.
The men remembered that fateful day when the ielele showed themselves
Coming in their full beauty, cunningly luring all to them.
They told everyone what they must have to be satisfied
They needed the strongest warrior as a sacrifice, a symbol to continue peace
First, a warning would be given, then the gory bloodshed would soon follow
If their demands were not duly met in a short time.
Stubborn in their ways, the guards refused, cursing the ielele for coming
Alexandru pleaded them to change their minds, as he was a firm believer
But he was laughed at, ridiculed for believing in such nonsense.
At first, the air stood still, an impossible taught, magical tension
Then, for a year, nothing happened, lulling everyone into a sense of calm,
The Ielele never showed themselves but sinisterly plotted all the same.
They cast spells over the prison, causing plagues and sickness
Without cause or explanation, prisoners died suddenly
Terrible fights broke out amongst the closest of the groups
Everything was always on edge, and nothing seemed right.
The recollected on how finally, the pricolici finally first came and attacked
Impossible, grisly scenes of death and destruction that ensued
Gherla was almost closed, and the town itself destroyed.
Listening to the far-off screams, they solemnly pondered ancient prayers
Hoping all was not totally and utterly lost, as they already knew.

Somberly, they bowed their heavy heads in deep, reflecting contemplation
Preparing for the gruesome and grisly scene that was to await them
Silently praying that all might not be as they feared and dreaded,
Cursing their fellow men because they did not heed the ielele warning
For they knew all the way this could have and was to be solved
Cussing bitterly at themselves for not taking the much-needed action
But it felt too late, as their mightiest gents now lay dead or perishing.
Grimly and hesitantly nodding at each other, they reluctantly concurred,
Go to the lower levels where the barbaric pricolici might still lurk
Finally, they silently seized their hefty guns with dazzling lights
With one last deep breath, they quietly exited through the stairwell door
The glowing overhead bulbs flickered dimly with a loud and foul sizzle
Just before, all power whirred off with a terrible zap and whine.

Down the dingy guard watchtower, they went so cautiously and alertly
Into the dark, shadowy halls where the werewolves now crept and stalked
They were growling and snarling, deep grunts of terrific intensity
Over the men's walkie-talkies, others radioed to them desperately,
But none were to avail, as all fell victim to the unfolding carnage
Far-off gunshots resounded off the tunnel walls less and less
And the final gut-wrenching screams of pure anguish sounded and echoed.
Abandoned, flickering flashlights lit up the extreme, barbarous carnage
Sickeningly horrid and fresh blood trails led snaking in all directions
Light shone on open, crimson, gore-covered, and blood-soaked cells.
Bits and pieces of limbs and full and broken bones lay strewn about
Standing as a blunt reminder of the pricolici's pure and utter brutality,
Some dying men slouched against the walls, groaning and moaning
They gasped and wheezed harsh rattles of a hauntingly longing yowl
Almost reminiscent of the brutishly cruel beings they may soon become,
Alas, it was as they had feared, and how it was before—they were too late.

The men winced and recoiled at the grisly sights, gagging at the foul smells
Grigore sighed mournfully as he carefully thrust open the stairwell door.
Quietly signaling the others, down and down they vigilantly ventured
At long last, they reached the steps' dried blood-soaked bottom.
Through another dark, gore-filled corridor, they tiptoed ever so alertly
The stagnant air hung thick with the stench of stinking iron and body fluids
Some nauseating reek of pungently putrid stung their wrinkling noses
Through this, they surely knew the evil creatures were still close by.
With a pool of thick, black blood ahead, Grigore knelt down, grimacing
Sticking in his finger, the fluid seemed to glitter and gleam
This was surely not any mere mortal blood, he could very much tell,
The trail might lead them to one of those devilish demonic beasts
Severely injured, perhaps it be, natheless[4], sinisterly and savagely murderous.

They continued, and suddenly froze as a pricolici stood tall before them,
Its long arms hanging past its waist, with its beastly snout, it deeply sniffed.
Curiously glowering, awaiting movement; blood-soaked fur matted down
It grinned a ghastly, impossibly huge, toothy, ear-to-ear sneer
Vampire-like fangs shone razor sharp, canines protruding from its mouth,
Its ruby red, luminous eyes blazed an eternal flame, and ancient light
Within them, an ever-growing, insatiable ravenousness of malevolent souls.
Its long, razor, blade-like claws glimmered in Grigore's flashlight.
Three meters tall, at least, the being towered menacingly over them,
Hideous, shaggy feet showed hardened toes with shining talon-like nails
It hunched in a low, sturdy stance, muscles priming to pounce or sprint
As if it had been feverishly anticipating their once again grand encounter.

The freakish beast growled ferociously once more, steadying its low stance,
It began to charge, but the men keenly noticed it had been gravely gashed.
Taking this pivotal opportunity, Grigore loudly ordered all to fire
They laid lead into it, striking its ugly head, bouncing off its tangled fur
But still it rushed and dashed, its pace not yet lessening or slowing.
The three men swiftly and panickedly turned to hurriedly sprint
They rapidly fled from their vile foe, running through yet another door
Wishing longingly to lose the awful monster or gain some needed distance
But hope was none as it stayed loudly snarling ever so close behind them.

Pure adrenaline coursed powerfully through their terrified cores
Mihail, all of a sudden, promptly remembered he had one grenade.
He hollered for the others to cover him, and they at once spun round
Firing fiercely, their arms booming, the beast was now beginning to lag,
Its mouth open, still in that yawning snarl, Mihail knew what he must do
Quickly unpinning his munition, he precisely aimed and strongly threw,
His small but mighty explosive just narrowly got into the monster's gape.
There was a monstrous boom, and the enormous blast sent them flying
They landed with a dull thud, their wind being knocked out.

Shaking dust off and coughing deeply, they glanced cautiously behind them
The devilish and hellish pricolici was blown to bloody bits and pieces
A wave of uneasy relief went through them all as they stood shakily.
Grigore looked back once more, horrified at the being, and whistled:
"That was a close one, thank God you snatched that Mihail
Good on remembering from last time, as it nearly fatally scratched us
I almost bled out before we were finally able to shoot it dead.

[4] Natheless- Archaic; adverb: Nevertheless, notwithstanding

Those things are nearly impossible to kill, but I am surprised they got in
Because of all the magical reinforcements we put in place.
But I do fear this is the first of many perils of a long journey,
As we can all sense the ielele magic ever growing, leading us toward them
And beyond that, we have a debt that we owe them that we must duly pay."
Alexandru and Mihail nodded in silent, solemn agreement
All shuddered violently with remembered terror and for what lay ahead.

Down and down to the dungeons the three continued
Where all the ghoulish, fiendish werewolves had entered.
As they neared the entrance, the underground section seemed to glow
It luminesced with that same eerie intensity energy they all felt before,
The air seemed to stand still with the mystic tension of the ielele.
Grigore, leading in front, went watchfully in first, opening the heavy gate
He pushed the interior door ajar, and his light shone on the carnage,
Unending blood, which was fresh and drying into stains.
Heads and innards lay about—half-eaten bodies slumped over
A growing smell of sickening sweet rot filled the dank stone chamber
Flies buzzed round and maggots squirmed in the few fetid pricolici corpses
The three men gagged and retched upon these grisly and revolting scenes,
As nothing of this horrendous level or scale could they have ever predicted.

Far deeper and deeper into the snaking caverns, they vigilantly ventured
Following the growing blood trail, it glimmered more brightly than before
Through dark and winding passageways, far past the dungeons they knew.
The air seemed to thicken again, held still by ielele magical spell;
That ancient supernatural tension amplified ever stronger with every step—
Into the dark passages they trekked, into forgotten caverns unrecognized.
Still, the spell in the air strengthened to an unbearable degree
They neared their lair, and at last, the blood trail reached a mighty door.
The air buzzed wildly with the ielele intoxicatingly mesmerizing song,
Beckoning them inside, calling them to some long-forgotten journey
A reminder of the debt they had, and the ielele favor of trickery.

The three men stopped tiredly and turned off their bright lights
As brilliant gemstones luminesced all upon the wall of stone.
They admired the door's ornately beautiful and intricate detail
Heavy stone interlaid with magnificent patterns reminded of sacred rituals
Shining golds and gems swirled with the same allure of the Ielele song
The brilliant jewels seemed to hum and resonate the strongest
Those same impossible flashes of great light they saw upon the hill.
There was a tremendously thunderous quaked that shook the whole cavern
A wall of stone came down, blocking the passage from whence they came,
They heard the blood-lusting pricolici screech from far above
Awakened from the dead and dying by the earth-shattering boom.
Grigore felt a dire fright and his heart skip a beat, listening
Though he felt a warming reassurance wash over him, as did the other two
They felt the pure psychedelic, alluring way of the magical ielele,
Calling and imploring them to come into their awaited quest and new life.

Zack Helman

“Scales and Smoke”

Whitmere Hale woke up to a fist slamming against the front door. There was no voice, no familiar rhythm—nothing so mundane. Just the ruthless sound of bare knuckles striking wood, steadfast and unending.

Slam. Slam. Slam.

Slam, slam. Slam. Slam.

Before he knew it, he was stumbling out of his bed and slipping on a light tunic. He eyed the whittling knife on his desk for a moment, before turning away, and sweeping out of his room on silent feet. If whoever was at the door had ill intentions, they wouldn’t have *knocked*. They would have broken the door down.

Mam stood in front of the hallway arch, a candle flickering gently between her hands. She stared out towards the front door, shifting uneasily on her feet. If he could see her face better, Whitmere was sure she’d be gnawing at her lip.

Whitmere put his weight into his next step—pressing down on a creaky floorboard he usually passed over—and Mam stilled. Her hair spilled dark and heavy over her shoulder as she turned toward him, eyes searching the shadows.

“Meir? Is that you?”

“Hi, Mam,” he greeted quietly. He stepped forward to take her into a quick hug. “Were you expecting a visitor, tonight?”

Mam shook her head. “No,” she said, stifling a yawn. “It’s… far too early. We’d best go see and who’s at the doorstep.”

Whitmere nodded. It was pitch-black outside—from what he gleaned from how no light crept into the house through their finicky blinds—and clearly *hours* away from proper daylight. A late-night visit like this was beyond strange. He wondered if he should be concerned. Was whatever this stranger needed them for so urgent that it simply couldn’t wait for a more reasonable hour?

The chill bit at his arms as he stepped into the entryway, and his mother was just in step behind him, brows furrowed with concern.

Whitmere hesitated, hand hovering over the handle of the door. It trembled and clattered woodenly beneath his outstretched fingers. The knocking hadn’t stopped—each blow landed heavier than the last, nearly rattling the door in its frame. His little sister, Anne, would wake soon, if she hadn’t already.

Whitmere glanced back at his mother for a moment, before opening the door. He was instantly blinded by blaring torchlight and staggered back, hand flying up to shield his watering eyes. The candle his mam held was a dim, sputtering little thing in comparison to the figurative *bonfire* this visitor held aloft. The sudden brightness left his vision swimming, and he blinked hard, trying to clear it.

Distantly, he wondered what was used to fuel it, to achieve such an effect.

His mother's sallow candle was a feeble flame by nature, but it was undeniable that the visitor's flame was beyond even *ordinary* torchlight. He could put it up to an expensive alcohol, or some other flammable resource, but he found himself doubtful. Something about the sight before him felt… unnatural. *Draconic*, even. Was it the saliva of a Wyrmdrake, distilled into some impossible fuel? Poured onto a simple cloth and set alight?

The Wyrmdrake were a fierce breed of dragon. The only way to acquire Wyrm saliva was to kill the Wyrm and tear out the organ that contained its spit, or subjugate the beast and extract the substance while it still breathed. One option was dangerous and bloody—the other was cruel and inhumane. Regardless of method, it was not easy to get one's hands on. Who would use such a scant, unattainable resource for something as simple as *torch fuel*?

The visitor stood in front of Whitmere, fist held up as if to knock again. At seeing them, he lowered his arm and took a small step back, cloak falling down to conceal the rest of his person in a swath of heavy, black fabric.

A rush of envy ran through him. What a thing to have, Whitmere thought. That cloak could stop you from feeling the wind from an approaching blizzard, and then some. It couldn't be anything but expensive.

It was a gusty night, and the trees around them swayed and bent precariously deep with the wind. This man's cloak remained motionless through it all. A pocket of silence in the midst of a storm. It only added to Whitmere's jealousy.

The fabric looks costly, as well. Admittedly, he couldn't discern the smaller details through the billowing torchlight, but he was certain of this. He had the strangest feeling that, should he reach out to touch the fabric, it'd be dense and tightly woven. Like he could feel the quality of the wool, right down to the stitches.

He swallowed, suddenly uncomfortable for a reason he couldn't quite name. He would never have anything like that. The services he and his mother provided to the town wouldn't raise them out of their poverty. An item as costly as the cloak would cost more than he could give. That mattered little, though, when nobody would sell such luxuries to his family in the first place. Not to a bastard child, and the woman who'd borne him.

“I’m here for Whitmere Hale,” the stranger said, voice flat and empty. “Are you him?”

Something cold and heavy was beginning to claw its way around Whitmere’s throat. He struggled to speak through it, mouth working soundlessly around words that refused to come.

“Yes,” he finally choked out. “Yes, I—I am him. What do you need at this hour?”

The man stared at him, expression shadowed in the torchlight. “You are to pack for a day’s travel, then meet me at the North gate. You’ve been chosen to lay the totem.” *The... totem?* Was it already time for that? “You will be there in ten minutes. Do not delay.”

They’d chosen *him* to lay the totem? Why him? Why not someone else?

“No..!”

Mam staggered back into the wall with a thud and Whitmere startled. An old frame on the wall fell to the ground. Before he could reach out to help, she cursed vehemently under her breath and pulled herself upright, candle held out before her.

In the blink of an eye, she swiped a small bag from off the coat-hanger and rushed back into the house, backlit by the flickering torchlight. Mam’s nightdress swished in a way he could only think to describe as desperate, before she vanished from sight.

Whitmere reached out to the wall to steady himself, feeling lightheaded. *Mam cursed,* he thought dumbly. He could only be glad that Anne was asleep to miss it. *The world is turning on its head.*

“Mam…”

The stranger turned away, taking the flame of the torch with him, and Whitmere squinted. Between adjusting to *too* much light, or adjusting to a sudden near *lack* of light entirely, he wasn’t sure which one he preferred.

At least this wasn’t painful. Just… mildly jarring.

Laughter bubbled in his throat, unreasonable and horribly out-of-place, and he choked it down. That wouldn’t matter for long, though. Deep within the Wyrmwoods, making his way to lay the totem, none of that would matter at all.

Thinking about such things right now were useless distractions. He’d be better off thinking of how to accomplish the impossible.

Like… learning to sword-fight in under an hour.

Whitmere wanted to laugh. Or maybe cry. Maybe both.

Scales and smoke, I’m doomed.

“Move quickly,” the stranger cautioned, bringing him back to the present. “If you take too long, someone else may be chosen in your place.”

The man’s eyes wandered behind him, towards where his mam had hurried off to, and Whitmere stiffened as his gaze lingered. *He couldn’t mean to…*

When the man looked back toward him, eyes dull and cold, Whitmere couldn’t fight the horrified chill that ran up his spine. Whoever this was… he didn’t care about him and his family.

This was a threat, he realized.

His fingers wrapped around the hem of his tunic, trembling. He could never let his mam and Anne take his place in something as dangerous as this. Saying no was no longer an option, if it was ever one at all. a

“Okay. Fine. But… why me?” he whispered. “And who—who even *are* you?”

Whitmere felt that he deserved that, at the very least.

The man stood still for what felt like a decade too long, staring down at him. Whitmere pulled his arms tighter around him in a vain attempt to block out the biting wind. He wished he had worn something warmer out. A pair of sleep pants and a simple tunic weren’t enough.

“I am Ser Arlen.” Whitmere’s eyes widened. A servant of the Marshal—and a well-known one, at that. For him to *speak* to one was… unbelievably rare. For one to seek him out was even more so. “*You* were chosen, boy, not them,” Ser Arlen said lowly. “Do your task and do it proudly. Your village is counting on you.”

Ser Arlen left without a word, and Whitmere stood, paralyzed, in the open doorway.

The totems… were the only thing that warded off the Wyrm. He didn’t understand it—nobody did, really—but he knew that to be a fact. Whatever they were, however they kept them *safe*—without them, the village would be nothing but cinders and ashes, and everyone he knew would be dead.

His mother. His sister. *Every single member of the village*. His hands trembled at his sides, fingers digging into his pant legs. All *gone.*

And they were relying on *Whitmere* to lay it.

The village is counting on you.

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“You are to be quick, boy.”

“Yes, sir,” Whitmere said quietly.

Ser Arlen shoved a worn map and sword into Whitmere's hands. The weapon felt massive and unwieldy in his grasp, and he fumbled to hold it properly. "Follow the map, and do not break off to explore," Ser Arlen said, not meeting his eyes. "Do not hesitate to use this sword, should the need arise."

Whitmere's throat felt like it was closing up on itself. His hands trembled around the items they held.

Out of all the children who were of age in the village, he couldn't understand why they had selected *him*? His cousin, Theron Redwyne, would have been frothing at the mouth for a task like this, and he would have had the bravery and brawn to succeed at it too! The outburst he'd made the previous week over not getting to join his elder brother in a Wyrm skirmish was evidence of that—a skirmish he'd only been held back from due to cautious parents, not a lack of ability.

Whitmere had *seen* Theron almost kill a young Wyrm, once, and he wasn't alone in his ambitions. Reina MacGregor, Garrick Drayton, Callen Merrick—literally most everybody Whitmere knew would have taken up such a task with vigor.

Whitmere, who had been chosen instead, was nearly pallid with his terror.

By the ancestors, he was going to die.

"Boy!"

"Yes—yes, sir!" Whitmere exclaimed.

"Repeat my instructions back to me," Ser Arlen snapped.

"Don't—don't wander off, be fast, a-and use my sword if I need to?" Whitmere stammered in answer. Ser Arlen gave him a sharp look. "And… and…" Those were the instructions! Had he missed something somehow? Be quick, follow the map, no exploring, use his sword… and… Oh! "The totem! I'm sup—supposed to make my way to the shrine, plant the totem inside, and r-return home."

The task that he had been chosen to do, for a reason he could only imagine.

Somehow, Ser Arlen looked even more irritated than he had before. Trepidation gripped Whitmere's heart in a chokehold before Ser Arlen found the kindness in his heart to nod slowly. "Yes," he said. "You are to plant the totem. It may be dangerous, but I am sure you will succeed."

Whitmere didn't think so. He was going into the Wyrmwood—a massive, maze-like forest occupied by angry plants and even angrier Wyrmdrakes. He thought that, quite honestly, he was being sent out to his doom.

Sliding his sword behind his belt, Whitmere busied himself with looking through his satchel. The map crinkled in his other hand as he moved, and he tucked it under his arm for safekeeping. He was hesitant to ruin it before he'd even stepped out of the village.

He didn't have much with him. His mam had tried her best, but she'd barely been able to grab his waterskin, his whittling knife, and a couple strips of jerky before rushing back in time to all but shove him out of the house. It was just enough for a day or two's journey and back, if he was smart. He'd be hungry, but if rationed properly, it might last.

Whitmere could only hope it would be enough. He was a dirt-poor hunter.

A hand landed on his shoulder, and he jolted. "I—uhm—Ser Arlen?" He couldn't help but pause at the weary look on the man's face, something caught between sorrow and resignment. He'd barely known Ser Arlen for any time at all, yet he knew that such expression was uncharacteristic for him. "Are you alright?"

Ser Arlen's face twisted for a moment—just long enough for his brows to carve deep furrows between his eyes, and his eyes to age centuries in seconds—before he returned to normal.

"Yes," he replied stiffly, releasing Whitmere's shoulder. "Let's get to the gate. Daybreak's near, and the sooner you're off, the better."

Annabelle Kirkland

"The Whispering Woods"

In the old fashioned village of Eldergrove, nestled between rolling hills and dense forests, there was a legend that had been passed down through generations. It spoke of the Whispering Woods, a mystical forest where the trees could speak to those who dared to listen. Most villagers dismissed it as mere folklore, but for young Clara, the tales ignited her imagination.

Clara was an adventurous girl with a wild mane of curly hair and bright green eyes that sparkled with curiosity. Every day after school, she would wander close to the edge of the woods, peering into the shadows cast by towering oaks and whispering pines. Her friends often warned her to stay away, claiming the woods were haunted, but Clara felt an irresistible pull toward them.

One crisp autumn afternoon, as golden leaves danced in the breeze, Clara decided it was time to explore deeper into the forest. She packed a small backpack with snacks, a flashlight, and her favorite notebook, determined to document whatever wonders she might find. With a deep breath, she stepped beyond the familiar tree line, her heart racing with excitement.

As she ventured further, the sunlight filtered through the branches, creating a mosaic of light and shadow on the forest floor. Clara marveled at the beauty around her. The vibrant colors of the leaves, the soft rustle of the wind, and the distant sound of a bubbling brook. But soon, she noticed something peculiar. The air seemed to hum with a gentle melody, almost like a whisper beckoning her forward.

“Hello?” Clara called out, her voice echoing softly among the trees. “Is anyone there?”

To her surprise, a low, melodic voice responded, “Welcome, dear child. We have been waiting for you.”

Startled yet intrigued, Clara followed the sound, her footsteps light on the carpet of fallen leaves. As she walked, the whispers grew clearer, weaving tales of ancient times and forgotten secrets. The trees seemed to sway gently, their branches reaching out as if to guide her deeper into the woods.

“Who are you?” Clara asked, her heart pounding with a mix of fear and wonder.

“We are the guardians of this forest,” the voice replied. “We protect the magic that resides within these woods. Few have come to listen, but you possess a rare gift.”

Clara’s eyes widened. “A gift? What do you mean?”

“You have the ability to hear our stories,” the voice explained. “But with this gift comes responsibility. You must share our tales with the world, so they are never forgotten.”

Determined to honor the request, Clara nodded. “I promise to tell your stories. But how can I help?”

“Listen closely,” the voice instructed. “Each tree holds a memory, a piece of history. Write them down, and let others know of our existence.”

With newfound purpose, Clara spent hours wandering the Whispering Woods, listening intently to the stories shared by the trees. She learned of brave knights, lost loves, and the harmony of nature. Each tale filled her heart with warmth and wonder..

As dusk began to settle, Clara realized it was time to return home. Reluctantly, she bid farewell to the trees, promising to return. “Thank you for sharing your stories with me,” she said, her voice filled with gratitude.

“Remember, dear child,” the voice echoed softly, “the magic of the woods lives on through you. Share our tales, and we shall remain alive in the hearts of many.”

With that, Clara made her way back to the village, her mind buzzing with excitement. She couldn’t wait to share the enchanting stories of the Whispering Woods with her friends and family. That night, as she lay in bed, she dreamed of the magical forest and the voices that had welcomed her.

In the days that followed, Clara became a storyteller, captivating the villagers with her tales of adventure and wonder. The legend of the Whispering Woods spread like wildfire, drawing curious souls from far and wide. People came to listen, to learn, and to connect with the magic that Clara had discovered.

As the seasons changed, Clara continued her visits to the woods, each time uncovering new stories and mysteries. One winter's day, she stumbled upon an ancient oak, its bark etched with symbols she couldn't decipher. Intrigued, she traced the patterns with her fingers, feeling a surge of energy pulse through her.

The oak's voice was deep and resonant, carrying the weight of centuries. "You have found the Tree of Origins," it rumbled. "Within these symbols lies the history of our world, a tapestry woven with threads of time."

Clara's heart raced with anticipation. "Can you teach me to understand them?"

"Patience, young one," the oak replied. "In time, you will learn. For now, continue to listen and write. The knowledge will reveal itself when you are ready."

"How do I begin?" Clara asked, eager to unlock the mysteries contained within the oak's bark.

"Begin by observing," the oak advised. "Each symbol is a story, each pattern a lesson. Write what you see, what you feel. Let your heart guide you, for understanding comes not just from the mind but from the soul."

Clara felt a mix of excitement and reverence as she stood before the ancient oak, its presence commanding and wise. The symbols etched into its bark seemed to dance under her touch, whispering secrets of ages long past. She knew that this encounter was another step in her journey through the Whispering Woods, a place where every tree held stories waiting to be discovered.

Clara nodded, feeling the truth in the oak's words. She realized that her journey was not just about learning the language of the symbols but also about connecting with the essence of the forest and its timeless wisdom. With each visit, she would bring her journal, recording her observations, thoughts, and dreams inspired by the woods.

She sketched the symbols in her journal, pairing them with her thoughts and observations. Over time, she noticed how the symbols echoed the stories told by other trees in the forest—the willow’s tale of the spirit, the songs of the streams, and the whispers of the wind. She realized that the symbols were not isolated; they were threads in a vast tapestry, weaving together the history of the world.

And so, with each season, Clara continued her visits, her bond with the Whispering Woods deepening. She knew that one day, the full tapestry of the world's history would unfold before her, woven

together by the threads of time and the wisdom of the trees. Until then, she cherished every moment, every discovery, knowing that she was part of something much greater than herself.

The symbols on the Tree of Origins were more than just a record of the past—they were a guide for the future. They reminded Clara of the importance of balance, connection, and respect for the natural world. The forest had entrusted her with its stories, and she vowed to honor them, ensuring that the wisdom of the Whispering Woods would never be forgotten.

Years passed, and Clara blossomed into a wise young woman, respected and admired by all who knew her. Her tales of the Whispering Woods became legendary, inspiring others to seek out the magic in their own lives. The forest, once shrouded in mystery, became a place of pilgrimage, where people came to listen, reflect, and find comfort.

As Clara continued her visits, she began to notice subtle changes in the forest. New saplings sprouted where none had grown before, and flowers bloomed in vibrant hues, painting the landscape with color. The forest seemed to respond to her presence, thriving under her care and attention. It was as if the trees themselves were grateful for her companionship and the stories she shared with the world.

One spring morning, as Clara wandered through the woods, she felt a familiar presence beside her. It was the voice of the first tree she had spoken to, now a trusted friend and guide.

"You have done well, Clara," it said warmly. "The stories live on because of you."

Clara smiled, her heart full of gratitude. "Thank you for trusting me with your tales. I will continue to share them, so the magic of the Whispering Woods is never forgotten."

And so, the legacy of the Whispering Woods endured, a testament to the power of stories and the enduring bond between humans and nature. Clara's journey had begun with a simple curiosity, but it had led her to discover a world of wonder and wisdom, forever changing her life and the lives of those around her.

In the end, Clara's journey had been one of discovery and transformation, a testament to the power of curiosity and imagination. She had found her place in the world, and in doing so, had inspired others to seek out their own paths. The Whispering Woods had taught her that the true magic of the world lies not in the extraordinary, but in the everyday moments of connection and understanding. And as long as there were those willing to listen, the whispers of the woods would continue to echo through time, a gentle reminder of the beauty and mystery that surrounds us all.

In her final days, Clara wrote a book chronicling her adventures and the lessons she had learned from the forest. It was a labor of love, a testament to the power of storytelling and the enduring bond between humans and nature. The book became a cherished treasure, passed down through generations as a source of inspiration and wisdom.

Clara's legacy lived on, not just in the pages of her book, but in the hearts of all who had been touched by her stories. The Whispering Woods remained a place of wonder and enchantment, a sanctuary for those seeking solace and connection. And as long as there were those willing to listen, the whispers of the woods would continue to echo through time, a gentle reminder of the beauty and mystery that surrounds us.

Chaniya Turner

“Marked for Magic”

In a land where the magic flowed through the air, there lived a woman named Salim. She was a curious twenty-year-old with beautiful long locs, her tips dyed a fiery red that matched her spirited personality. Her mentor, the renowned wizard Alem, was known throughout the kingdom for his wisdom and power. Salim had been under his wing for three years; every day was a new adventure.

One bold morning, as the sun’s golden rays kissed the petals of the roses, Salim rushed to the tower's study. She was ready to learn the secrets of a new spell Alem promised to teach her. The heavy oak door creaked open, and she entered the room filled with ancient stones and bubbling potions. “Alem! I am here!” Salim called out, her voice bouncing off the stone walls. Her heart pounded with a mix of excitement and anxiety. Alem turned on his workbench, his long silver beard shining in the light. He held a small, decorated box in his hands. “Ah, Salim, you’re right on time. Today I have a special task for you.” Salim’s smile widened, and her eyes sparkled with curiosity. “What is it, Alem?”

Alem placed the box on the table and gestured for Salim to come closer. “Inside this box is a rare artifact known as the Heart of Phoenix. The artifact is known for its significant power. It can grant power to those who possess it, but it also comes with considerable risk. The artifact must be purified in the river under the light of a full moon, or it will begin to corrupt the one who uses it.” Salim nodded, her hands shaking in anticipation. She could feel the weight of the responsibility on her shoulders. “What do you need me to do, sir?” Alem’s face grew serious. “I need you to take this artifact to the Whispering Lakes and perform the ritual. It is a risky journey, filled with challenges. But I have faith in you, Salim.” Determined, Salim took a deep breath. “I won’t let you down.” As Salim lifted the box containing the Heart of the Phoenix, a chill ran down her spine. The artifact pulsed against her fingertips, its energy unpredictable, shifting between warmth and icy dread. Alem’s gaze lingered on the box, his expression grave.

"Remember, Salim," he warned, "if the purification fails or the artifact is exposed to darkness too long, it will seek another host. And once it chooses, there’s no turning back." The words unsettled her, but she swallowed the unease, pressing forward. What could possibly go wrong?

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As Salim wandered further into the enchanted forest, she was drawn to a clearing where she found illuminated, delicate creatures dancing in the sunlight. Salim stepped into the dancing circle, curious, "Who are you? I've never seen beings like you before." Salim asked, her voice filled with curiosity. The leader addressed her from the rear, stating, "We are the Saci, air spirits of the enchanted forest. You must be Salim, the individual destined for great things." She walked in a small circle, observing the beings around her. Their laughter sounded like bells, filling the air, filling the air with a sense of magic and wonder. "Yes, that's me. I'm seeking Whispering Lakes. Can you help me find them?" Her eyes sparkled with hope. The Saci leader nodded, "Of course. But the path is riddled with challenges. We will guide you, but you must trust us and stay close."

With a nod of agreement, Salim followed the Saci, who fluttered ahead, illuminating hidden paths and revealing shortcuts. As they journeyed, the forest seemed to come alive, whispering secrets and tales of old. The adventure through the forest was filled with intrigue and danger. At one point, they stumbled upon a dark, shadowy cave where eerie figures lurked. "What are those creatures? They don't look friendly." Salim whispered, her voice filled with unease. She told herself she wasn't scared, but ghosts were not on her list of things to be worried about out here. "They are Samhain, forest guardians, bound to protect the enchantments. We must be careful and avoid their gaze." The Saci leader explained.

The Saci created a light shield around Salim, guiding her safely through the glade. Their presence kept her calm and focused, and soon they emerged into a brighter part of the forest. As they neared the Whispering Lakes, the forest began to thin, revealing a sparkling expanse of water. The surface of the lake rippled with a gentle breeze, and Salim could hear soft, melodious voices. "Are those water nymphs? They sound so beautiful." Salim remarked, entranced by the melodies. "Yes, they reside within the Whispering Lakes. They are kind and wise, but you must approach them with respect," the Saci leader advised.

Salim stepped carefully towards the edge of the lake, where the water nymphs began to appear. They were exquisite beings with flowing hair that seemed to merge with the water, and their eyes glimmered with ancient knowledge. "Yes, they reside within the Whispering Lakes. They are kind and wise, but you must approach them with respect," the Saci leader advised. Salim stepped carefully towards the edge of the lake, where the water nymphs began to appear. They were exquisite beings with flowing hair that seemed to merge with the water, and their eyes glimmered with ancient knowledge.

However, as soon as Salim approached, the water nymphs' expressions grew stern. "Halt, traveler. Who dares to enter our domain without invitation?" the water nymph leader demanded, her voice like a rushing stream. Salim hesitated, feeling a wave of nervousness. "I am Salim, guided by Saci. I seek answers and guidance on my journey." The water nymph leader narrowed her eyes. "Very well, Salim. To

prove your worth and gain our aid, you must solve two riddles. Fail, and you shall leave our waters untouched." Salim nodded, determined to prove herself. "I accept your challenge. What are the riddles?"

The first water nymph stepped forward; her voice was gentle but firm. "I speak without a mouth and hear without ears. I have no body, but I come alive with the wind. What am I?" Salim pondered for a moment before replying, "An echo." The water nymphs smiled, impressed. The second water nymph then spoke. "I am not alive, but I grow. I do not have lungs, but I need air. I do not have a mouth, but water kills me. What am I?" Salim thought carefully, recalling her knowledge of the natural world. "A fire." The water nymphs' stern expressions softened, and the leader nodded approvingly. "You have proven your wisdom, Salim. We shall guide you on your journey and share the secrets of the Whispering Lakes."

The water nymphs led Salim to a secluded spot by the lake, bathed in the gentle glow of the moonlight. In her hands, Salim held the Heart of the Phoenix, a radiant gemstone pulsing with fiery light. The nymph leader gestured towards the water. "To purify the Heart of the Phoenix, you must immerse it in the moonlit waters and focus your energy and intentions. Only the pure of heart can unlock its true power." Salim stepped forward, feeling the warmth of the gemstone. She knelt by the water's edge, letting the cool, moonlit waves lap at her fingers. Taking a deep breath, she submerged the Heart of the Phoenix into the water, the moonlight reflecting off its surface.

As she concentrated, her thoughts and emotions coalesced into a single point of light within her mind. The Heart began to glow brighter, its light mingling with the moonlight and the water, creating a mesmerizing dance of light and shadow. With a final surge of energy, the Heart of the Phoenix was purified, its light now a steady, calming flame. The nymphs' faces glowed with approval. "You have succeeded, Salim. The Heart of the Phoenix is purified, and its power is now yours to wield," the nymph leader declared. Salim felt a surge of strength and purpose. "Thank you, nymphs. Your guidance and the power of the Phoenix will help me on my journey."

As the night deepened, Salim felt a renewed sense of determination. She knew her journey was far from over, but with the support of the Saci and the wisdom of the water nymphs, she felt ready to face whatever lay ahead. "Thank you, Saci and Nymphs. You've given me strength and guidance. I won't forget this," Salim expressed gratefully.

Sazmine Dorsey

“The Dance of Autumn Leaves”

In twilight's glow, the leaves begin to fall,
A dance of gold and crimson in the breeze.
Nature’s whisper sings a silent call.

They twirl and spin, a fleeting carnival,
Each gust a partner, swaying with such ease.
In twilight's glow, the leaves begin to fall.

Beneath the trees, their colors brightly sprawl,
A tapestry woven from the memories.
Nature’s whisper sings a silent call.

The branches shiver, answering the thrall,
As sunlight fades and shadows find their peace.
In twilight's glow, the leaves begin to fall.

The world grows quiet, wrapped in autumn's shawl,
While laughter echoes through the rustling trees.
Nature’s whisper sings a silent call.

So let us dance beneath the fading pall,
Embrace the change as winter’s chill agrees.
In twilight's glow, the leaves begin to fall,
Nature’s whisper sings a silent call.

Ji’keryah Hill

“Mia and the Pearl of the Tides”

Once upon a time, a young girl named Mia lived in a small coastal village nestled snugly between leafy hills, surrounded by trees and a dark sky. The town, a tapestry of charming cottages with flower-laden balconies and proud fishing boats bobbing gently in the harbor, was alive with the briny scent of the sea. From the moment the sun broke over the horizon, casting golden rays across the tranquil waters, the village buzzed with the sounds of life: children laughed, gulls screamed, and waves surged rhythmically against the shore.

Mia, with her disordered chestnut hair dancing in the ocean breeze and bright green eyes that sparkled with mischief, was known throughout the village for her greedy, adventurous spirit and an unyielding love for the ocean. Each day after school, she raced down to the beach, leaving behind a trail of laughter that seemed to mingle effortlessly with the symphony of crashing waves. The sand was warm

and comforted her bare feet, and the salty breezes carried the whispers of countless tales the sea had to share.

One particularly sunny afternoon, while wandering the familiar coastline, Mia decided to explore a hidden cove she had stumbled upon before, a secluded haven where the world felt untouched. The cove was framed by steep rocky cliffs adorned with vibrant green ferns and delicate wildflowers that painted the landscape in strokes of color. As she stepped cautiously over the soft, warm sand, she admired the way the sunlight danced on the water's surface, casting sparkling diamonds across the waves.

As Mia wandered deeper into the cove, her eyes caught sight of something glimmering beneath the surface. Curiosity ignited within her, pulling her closer to investigate. Rushing over, she noticed a peculiar object half-buried in the grains of sand—a wooden box intricately carved with swirling motifs that echoed the rolling waves of the ocean. It was adorned with seashells and gemstones that twinkled like stars, each telling a story of the depths they might have come from. With her heart racing, Mia knelt, brushing away the sand with delicate fingers until the box was fully revealed.

As she opened it, a soft, warm glow enveloped her, illuminating her face with an ethereal light. Inside, nestled among delicate strands of vibrant seaweed, was a shimmering pearl unlike anything she had ever seen. This pearl was not merely white but radiated an array of colors reminiscent of a sunset—a stunning blend of fiery oranges, soft pinks, and tranquil purples. It seemed to pulse gently in her palm, and Mia felt an immediate, unexplainable connection to it, as if the ocean itself had drawn her to this moment.

That evening, with the pearl securely tucked away in her pocket, Mia set off to visit the village elder, a wise woman named Agatha. Agatha was revered in the village for her deep knowledge of sea lore and the stories passed down through generations. Arriving at Agatha's cozy cottage, with its walls adorned with nautical maps and artifacts from the sea, Mia felt a flutter of anticipation. Agatha listened intently as Mia shared her discovery, her eyes widening in astonishment when Mia described the pearl's beauty.

“Ah, the Pearl of the Tides,” Agatha whispered, her voice barely above a murmur, as if speaking the name aloud could summon its magic. “It is said to possess the very essence of the ocean’s wisdom and power. Those who find it are destined to protect its secrets and balance."

Mia's heart swelled with pride, yet it was quickly overshadowed by a sense of responsibility. Holding the pearl up to the dim light of the cottage, she marveled at its beauty but felt a growing unease in the following days. Strange occurrences gripped the village; tides surged higher than ever, and fierce storms brewed ominously on the horizon, threatening their tranquil way of life. The villagers gathered in concern, their faces etched with worry. Murmurs of superstition rippled through the community as they feared for their homes and livelihoods.

Determined to set things right, Mia sought Agatha's guidance anew. Breathless with urgency, she arrived at the elder’s cottage and relayed the unsettling happenings. “You must return the pearl to the sea,” Agatha advised, her voice steady but containing a sense of gravity. “Only then can balance be restored to both the ocean and your village. The pearl did not belong to the land, but was a gift from the tides.”

With unwavering determination igniting her spirit, Mia sprinted back to the hidden cove, her heart pounding with purpose. As she approached the water's edge, the ocean waves lapped invitingly at her feet, and feeling its power surging through her veins, she held the pearl high. The sun hung low in the sky, casting an orange glow that mirrored the colors of the pearl. With a deep breath, she whispered a promise to the sea: “I will protect you, and I will honor your magic.”

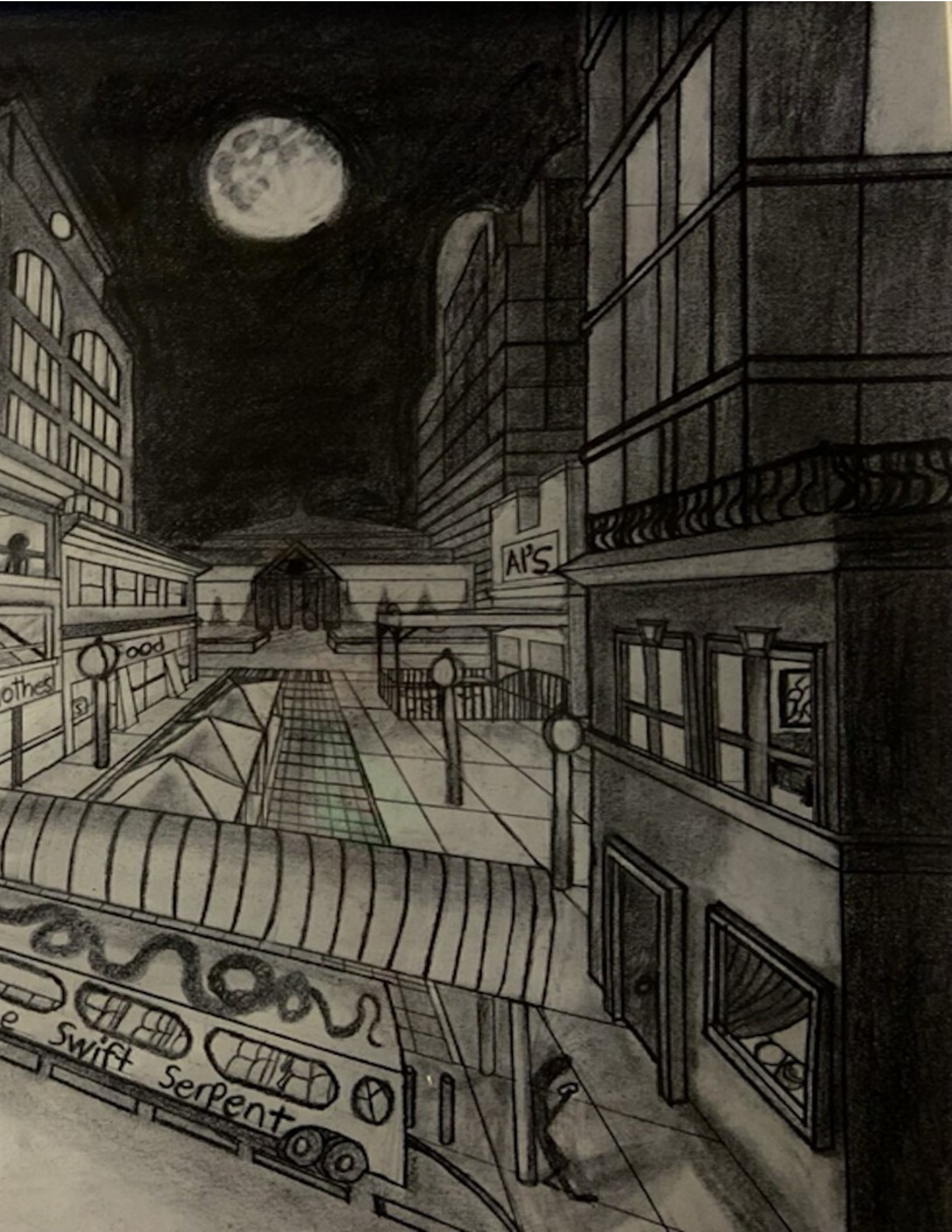
In one graceful motion, Mia cast the pearl into the waiting waves. As it touched the water's surface, a magnificent surge enveloped her, sending brilliant splashes of sparkling foam into the air. The sky, once shadowed by oppressive clouds, transformed—darkness receding, revealing a canvas painted in brilliant hues of azure and blush. The ocean, calmed by the pearl’s return, harmonized with the gentle breeze that swept across the beach, as if thanking Mia for her selfless act.

In that moment, the tides receded to their natural rhythm, restoring peace to the village. Laughter filled the air anew as children returned to the beaches, and fishermen resumed their work. From that day on, the village thrived, each united by a renewed bond with the sea. Mia, now a courageous protector of the ocean, often returned to the cove where her adventure had begun. She shared tales of her exploits with the waters that had whispered their secrets to her, and in return, she felt the pulsating rhythm of the ocean guiding her every footstep.

As the sun set in glorious hues of gold and crimson, Mia sat at the water’s edge, reflecting on the profound connection between herself and the sea. The waves sang songs of adventure, friendship, and a promise kept—a testament to the magic that flourishes when one respects the world around them. In time, the villagers came to understand, as Mia did, that while treasures may dazzle the eye, the true magic lies in the connections we nurture and the promises we cherish. In the heart of that coastal village, alongside the tides and under the spell of the shimmering sea, Mia’s name became forever entwined with the legend of the Pearl of the Tides.

Caroline Matthews

Transitions


AI'S
Swift Serpent

“The Stillness of Morning”

In the stillness of morning,
The world holds its breath,
wrapped in gauzy fog,
where the sun spills like honey,
golden and warm,
over sleepy rooftops.

The air is a cool caress,
a gentle kiss on the cheek,
while shadows stretch and yawn,
Reluctant to break the spell
of night’s soft embrace.
Birdsong flutters like a delicate ribbon,
Weaving through the silence,
Each note is a promise of the day to come.

A single drop of dew clings
to the edge of a blade of grass,
a diamond glinting in soft light,
ready to tumble into the waiting earth.
The trees stand tall,
Their leaves murmuring secrets
to the whispering wind,
As the world stirs from slumber.

In this moment,
Time holds still,
The heart beats in rhythm
With the pulse of morning,
a symphony of possibility,
where dreams awaken,
And the day unfolds like a blooming flower,
scented with hope,
Kissed by the dawn.

Ji’keryah Hill

“No Matter What”

Billy and his grandad Charlie, he calls him papaw, are one of the closest grandkids and grandparents’ duo in the world. Billy and his parents moved back to South Carolina when he was young to live within five minutes of his grandparents. When they moved, he really didn’t have a relationship with either one of his grandparents because he had never really seen them throughout his life. A couple of months after they moved back, Charlie and his wife Pat really tried to get closer to Billy and tried to connect to him. It wasn’t going the best, but they knew it would take some time. Pat and Charlie tried to hang out with Billy any chance that they got. As time moved on, they could sense they were getting closer to Billy, and they wanted to keep it up. Pat and Charlie started picking up Billy from school every Friday. When Billy saw that white GMC car pull up to pick him up, he knew that the weekend had arrived. One weekend Billy had a big basketball tournament going through the whole weekend. “Hey Papaw, can you and Mamaw come to my basketball tournament next weekend?” Billy asked. His Papaw and Mamaw responded at the same time saying, “We wouldn’t miss it for the world!”

The day had come, it was Billy’s basketball tournament. When he first got to the gym, his Mamaw and Papaw weren’t there yet, he didn’t think anything about this because he thought maybe they were running late. When the first quarter was coming to an end he looked at where his mom and dad were sitting to see if Charlie and Pat had made it yet, still nothing. “Where’s Mamaw and Papaw mom?” Billy asked his mom when the quarter ended. His mom responded, “I don’t know honey, they should be here any minute. Now go back in the huddle.” During a stoppage of play Billy saw his mom leaving the gym while talking to someone on the phone. He thought that was strange. At halftime he went over to his dad and asked, “Where did mom go? Is everything ok?” His dad said, “Oh yeah I’m sure it was just a work call or one of her friends.” Billy thought this was weird, but once again he didn’t think much about it. Right when the halftime ended and the third quarter was about to start, he saw his mom running through the gym doors. “Billy, we got to go,” His mother said loudly. Billy replied, “Mom I am in the middle of a very important game. What is so important that we must leave?” His mom said, “Something happened to Mamaw, we have to go now!”

“Mom what’s going on?” Billy kept asking his mom while getting in the car. “I just got off the phone with the police. Mamaw had a heart attack while getting ready for your game,” His mom said. After hearing this Billy started having many different thoughts in his head. Is she going to be, ok? How did this happen? Why is this happening to my grandma? Is this my fault? About ten minutes later Billy and his parents arrived at the hospital. They ran in and asked where Pat was. When they got to the room, Billy couldn’t walk in. “What are doing Billy, let’s go in,” His mom said. Billy said, “I don’t know if I can, y’all go ahead,” They did. While Billy’s parents were in the room, he was sitting right outside of it. He thought everything was going as good as it could at that moment. Until he heard his mom yelling, “Mom! Mom!

Don't leave me! We need the doctor in here now!" Doctors and nurses came running into the room. They were too late. Pat Merdith Young had passed away at the age of 82.

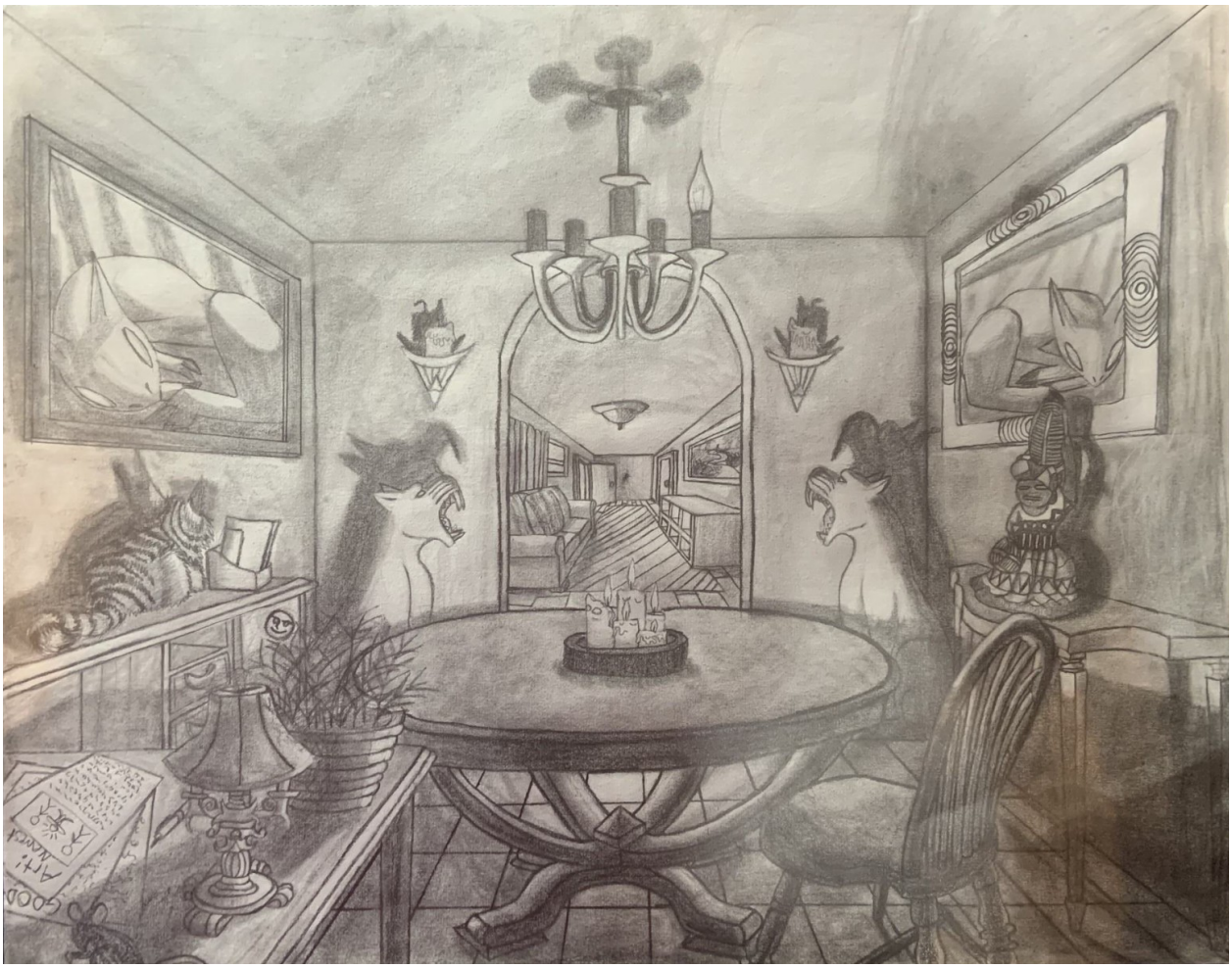
Billy didn't know what to do now. Should I go in? Should I stay out here? Should I just leave and sit in the visiting room? While thinking about what to do next, his Papaw came to sit next to him. "Hey Papaw. I think I know the answer to this, but I am going to ask it anyway, are you ok?" Billy asked. Charlie said, "I am actually ok. But I am not worried about myself. I am worried about you," Billy said, "I'm….I'm… ok," Right after saying the words ok he fell down into his Papaw's arms and started crying. "I'm just so sad and emotional because I finally felt like I was starting to have a relationship with you and her, but now that's over," Billy said to his Papaw. "You think just because your Mamaw isn't here anymore I'm just going to have a relationship with you anymore? Well, you are completely wrong my friend, I will always be there for you!" Charlie said. Billy said, "Can I tell you one more thing," Charlie said, "Sure, you can tell me anything!" "Another reason why I am so sad is because I feel like this is my fault. She had a heart attack getting ready for my game." Billy said. Charlie said, "Billy none of this is your fault. She was getting ready to watch her grandson play the sport he loves. She loved you and I love you Billy,"

The next couple of months were really tough for Billy and his family. They had his Mamaw's funeral service, which was hard. He then in May graduated from high school. This was a lot harder for him than he thought it would be. He knew that if his Mamaw was still there that she would have screamed and shouted when they called his name and when he walked across the stage. As the days, weeks, and months kept going Billy and his Papaw talked every day. Billy tried to stop by his every other day to check up on his Papaw. During the summer before Billy went to college, he spent most of it at his Papaw's house where they would play cards, take naps, sit on the porch and talk, and watch old westerns. Billy knew that he could be hanging out with his friends at a pool somewhere or the lake, but he wanted to spend as much time with his Papaw. He knew that when he moved into college in the fall, things were going to be different. The day had come, it was move in day for Billy.

"Papaw, I'm going to miss you. I promise I am going to try to call you every day!" Billy said. Charlie responded, "I know, I'm going to miss you too Billy. I want you to have this," Charlie pulled out one of his favorite watches from his pocket. "Papaw, are you sure? That's your favorite watch," Billy said. "I want you to have this to know that I am always with you no matter what, and no matter what time it is," Charlie said. A couple of months went by. College has been going pretty good so far for Billy. He has met some friends and got a girlfriend as well. He and his Papaw talk just about everyday as well. "Hey Papaw," Billy said, "This is my girlfriend, Madison," Madison said, "I have heard so much about you Mr. Young, I can't wait to meet you next week during Thanksgiving break!" Charlie said, "Hey Madison, I am looking forward to seeing you next week too!" "Alright Papaw well I guess I will see you next week, I can't wait to see you. I love you Papaw!" Billy said. Charlie responded, "I love you too Billy," That was the last time Billy ever talked to his Papaw. He passed away a week before Thanksgiving due to a stroke, Billy never saw his Papaw again. But he knows he will see him again, he knows he is in a better place, and he

knows that he is always watching over him. Now, wherever Billy goes he where's his Papaw's watch. To know that wherever he goes and what ever he does, his Papaw is with him no matter what and no matter what time it is.

Gavin Carnaggio



Pages of My Past: My Memories as a

2009-2010

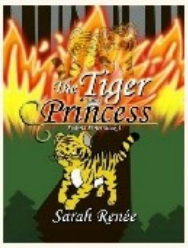
Enjoying Reading With Unicorns

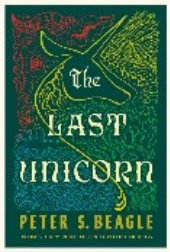
As I grew older, so did my love of reading. Around this time, I was seven to eight years old. I was absolutely obsessed with fantasy worlds and animals, especially unicorns and pegasus'. I remembered reading simple chapter books about such creatures, and fell in love with the stories, but mostly the illustrations. A favorite series of mine that I can remember was **If Wishes Were Horses**.

2012-2014

Getting Lost into Other Worlds

Even as I grew older, I never got tired of fantasy. In fact, my love for the genre grew. It was at this time where I started writing my own stories, whether it was ones starring my own characters, or fanfiction of my favorite characters. I remembered posting these stories on a site called Quotev, where people can post their own stories. Some of my favorite books at this time were **The Tiger Princess** and **The Last Unicorn**.

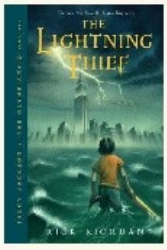




2014-2017

Sharing My Works Withs Others

In my later middle school years to my early high school years, I often posted my stories on Quotev. I became very invested in my writing, and would spend a lot of my free time drawing my characters, writing all sorts of information about them, as well as short fanfiction stories for my favorite fandoms. I had a handful of friends at this time that also had a Quotev account, and we often shared our stories and characters with each other. It was a lot of fun, as our love for creating made our friendships stronger. One thing I remembered us doing was writing short stories about us being in the **Percy Jackson** universe.



2018-2020

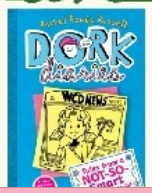
Losing The "Spark"

In my later high school years, I started to take AP classes and Dual Credit. I took a couple of literature classes, and while I enjoyed taking them and learned a lot from them, reading started to feel like a chore rather than something fun. While I still loved reading, I started to lose the "spark" I once had for reading and creating. I often skipped out on reading and writing/drawing and focused on other things more, like coursework.

2022-2024

Getting the "Spark" Back

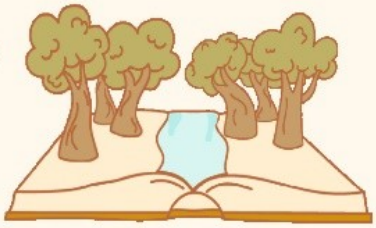
In my early twenties, I started to look back on my childhood to get back my "inspiration". One of the things that I looked back on was books from my childhood and early teenage years, such as **The Last Unicorn**, the **Percy Jackson** series, and one of my other favorites, which was the **Dork Diaries** series. Even though I did not have as much motivation to create as much as I used to (because of school and work), it was during these years that I grew to love reading again.

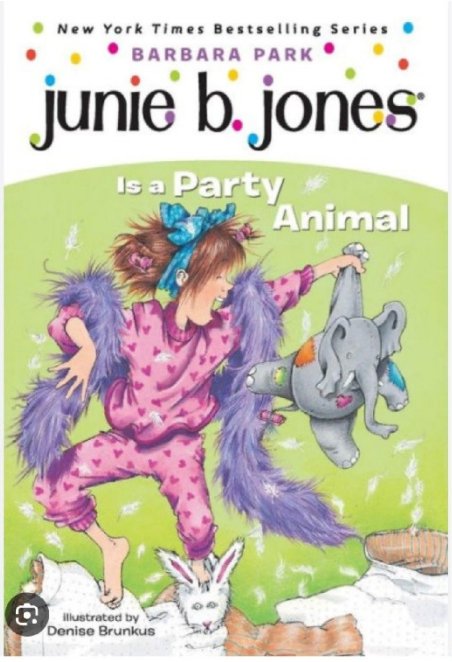


2025

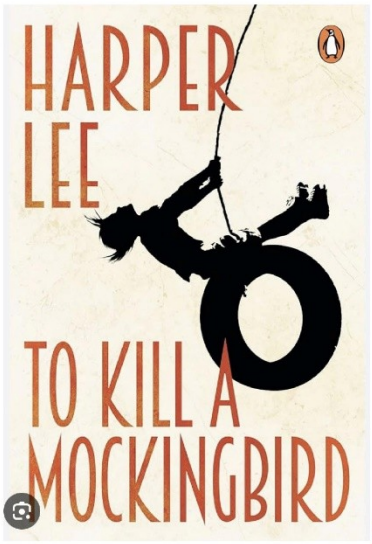
Returning to Creating

As I think about my childhood memories, I often look back on when I spent so much time/enjoying creating characters and stories. That is why one of my goals for this year and beyond is to get back to creating. It's sometimes difficult to do both working part time and studying full time, but I hope as the year goes on I am able to manage my time to include hobbies that used to bring me so much joy.





2014-2015- these i remember because my mom would never buy single books she always bought series. We had what felt like a million and I loved these books because it made me feel like I could read a chapter book but I wasn't very good at reading them and when I learned that I wasn't that good it made me hate them.



2018- This book I read in 8th grade was a weird book and I hated that they made us read it because it was boring. I vividly remember my teacher describing a deeper meaning then I learned to really like the book. I couldn't tell you why I reread it over and over because I have read it once but I do.

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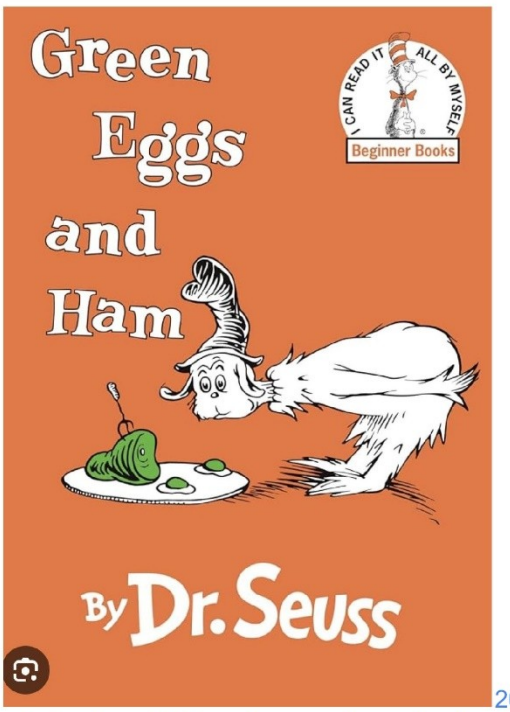
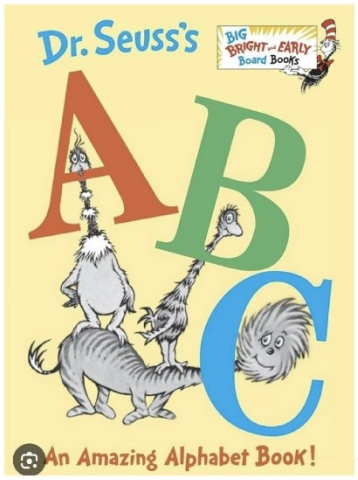
To All the Boys I've Loved Before
2020- this book changed my life. This was the book that made me fall in love with reading. This book helped me learn that I wasn't a bad reader, I just needed to find what I like. And since this book I have read hundreds of books and I won't ever turn back.



2021- my little sister was 4 she loved this book she thought it was funny and was the best thing. This is the first children's book I had read in years and that led me to reading a lot of kids books for the foreseeable future.



This was one of the most recent children's books I have read. My youngest sister is 3 and she is getting into people reading her books. This is her favorite. We read it every night. She also loves the illustrations.

2024 Collection